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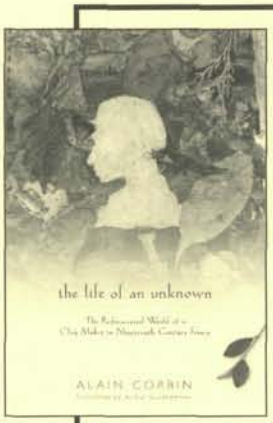

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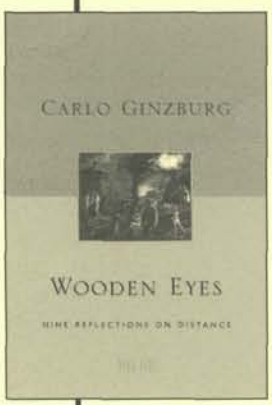

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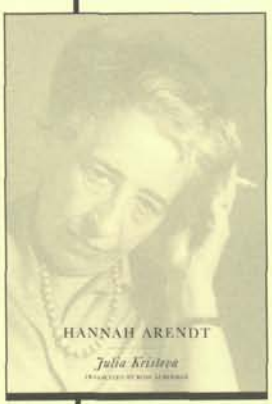

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The Seanachie

I learned recently that Brian Doyle's great-great-grandfather was a *seanachie*, or storyteller, in Glendalough, a lush vale in County Wicklow. This lineage will come as no surprise to anyone who reads Doyle's essay on Van Morrison—or his previous SCHOLAR essays and poems, whose subjects have ranged from Plutarch to William Blake to the Irish boxer Barry McGuigan.

And it was no surprise to me, given the dazzling rain of Doyle e-mails that have pattered onto my hard drive over the last three years (83 so far; I'm hoping for 1,001). From them I have learned, *inter alia*, that Robert Louis Stevenson arranged to have casks of Bordeaux shipped to him in Samoa; that the French composer Albert Roussel believed that during the act of creation, his pen gave off light; that Doyle, who is the editor of *Portland Magazine*, savors letters from readers that begin "Dear Idiot"; that the Japanese translator of one of his essays delighted him by apologizing for her "luck of imagination"; that a friend of his once saw a wolverine kill fourteen chickens and carefully arrange the bodies in a row with mismatched heads; and that his ideal guest list for a dinner party of eight would consist of William Blake, Van Morrison, Saint Catherine of Siena, Maimonides, Crazy Horse, Jesus Christ, and Doyle's wife, Mary.

I once asked the would-be host if there was a common thread among the men he'd written about for the SCHOLAR. He e-mailed back: "Sheer roaring passion."

The SCHOLAR has received its second Ellie, the elephant-shaped stabile presented annually by the American Society of Magazine Editors to winners of National Magazine Awards. Our first, in 1999, was for Feature Writing; this one was for General Excellence, for magazines with a circulation of less than 100,000. The citation called the SCHOLAR "a magazine of the mind . . . [that] transports readers into the world of ideas with precision and grace." We felt pretty cocky until the next day, when *Inside.com* expressed surprise that the Ellie had gone to "a magazine that most of the people in the audience wouldn't recognize if they got slapped across the face with it." They mightn't, but once they recovered from the blow, we hope they'd grab the weapon and start to read.

A. F.

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· CONTENTS ·

AT LARGE AND AT SMALL ..... *Francine du Plessix Gray* 5

COMMONPLACE BOOK ..... *collected by André Bernard* 12

ARTICLES

The Mass in Spanish ..... *D. Graham Burnett* 15

Ohio States ..... *Jeffrey Hammond* 33

Three Men and a Book ..... *Jacques Barzun* 49

Van ..... *Brian Doyle* 59

The Case of Thomas Carlyle ..... *Rochelle Gurstein* 77

The Come As You Are Not Party ..... *Natalia Rachel Singer* 91

Troping Through Proverbia ..... *Bert O. States* 105

A House in Bali ..... *Jamie James* 113

THE UNCERTAIN ART ..... *Sherwin B. Nuland* 123

JOURNAL ..... *Andrew Hudgins* 127

BOOKS

REREADING: Relics of Saint Katherine ..... *Patricia Hampl* 134

Eternal Africa ..... *George Packer* 140

REVIEWS ..... *Cristina Nehring, Aaron E. Hirsh, Casey Nelson Blake, David Hajdu* 143

POETRY

Rorschach's Rejected Blot ..... *Jean Monahan* 29

How To Do *and* John Henry's Hammer ..... *Cornelius Eady* 30

Bags ..... *Pamela Alexander* 47

The God Within ..... *Rachel Hadas* 48

The Great Dissident Cuban Poet Dies in Exile
at Auburn University ..... *Virgil Suárez* 58

The Musicians Play Basketball ..... *Tim Adell* 74

Trio ..... *Constance Egemo* 76

Felinus ..... *J. S. A. Lowe* 90

Selling the Old Piano ..... *Jeanne Emmons* 102

Rattlesnake Country ..... *Melvin Wilk* 104

THE READER REPLIES 155

THE PODIUM ..... *Garrison Keillor* 160

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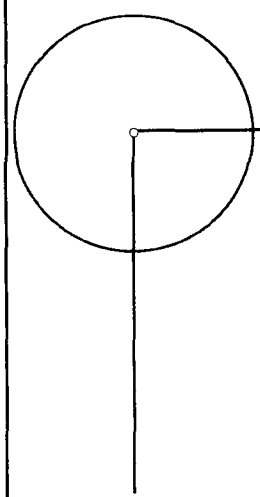

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AT LARGE AND AT SMALL

Loving and Hating Simone Weil

FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY

She started out as a Marxist activist but became, in 1932, one of the very first members of the French Left to denounce Soviet totalitarianism. Born a Jew, she devoutly practiced the rites of the Catholic Church but refused baptism, in part because she felt the Church was tainted with the spirit of Judaism. She preached pacifism and Christian charity, but never realized how much hardship her aggressive search for holiness could impose on others. The philosopher, theologian, and essayist Simone Weil was a thicket of contradictions, so it is perhaps natural that she has evoked more admiration and more ferocious rage than nearly any other twentieth-century writer who comes to mind.

T. S. Eliot believed that Weil displayed "a kind of genius akin to that of the saints." Kenneth Rexroth, however, accused her of "a captious, misinformed playing with Hinduism and comparative mythology [that is worse] than the confabulations of Robert Graves," and referred to her last work, *The Need for Roots*, as "a collection of egregious nonsense surpassed only by the deranged fantasies of the chauvinist Péguy." Leslie Fiedler wrote that Weil symbolized "the outsider as saint in an age of alienation." But Conor Cruise O'Brien condemned her for encouraging "rigid, primitive, and eccentric forms of censorship," and the Jewish theologian Hans Meyerhoff accused her of "committing slander against her own people" by "Satanizing the God of the Jews." On the other hand, Pope Paul VI looked on Weil as one of the three thinkers, along with Bernanos and Pascal, who had had the greatest influence on his intellectual development. And Camus so revered her that, twenty-five years after her death, he asked her parents for permission to spend an hour of meditation in her Paris room before boarding the plane to Stockholm to accept the Nobel Prize.

Weil's tactless forthrightness, her admirable indifference to others' opinions of her, made her as controversial among her peers as she is among contemporary readers. The most striking portrait of her in her late teens was drawn by Simone de Beauvoir, who encountered her in 1928 in a courtyard of the Sorbonne:

> I had long wanted to meet her because I'd heard that she'd broken into sobs at the news of a famine in China, I envied a heart able to beat across the world. I managed to get near her one day. . . . She said in a shrill voice that only one thing mattered these days: the revolution that would feed all the starving people on the earth. I retorted, no less adamantly, that the problem was not to make men happy, but to help them find a meaning in their existence. She glared at me and said, "It's clear you've never gone hungry." Our relations ended right there. I realized that she had classified me as a high-minded little bourgeoise, and I was angry.

I too developed deeply conflicting emotions about Simone Weil during the two years I spent in her company as her biographer; but before I plumb my own ambivalence, some brief biographical notes are in order. She was born in Paris in 1909, the brilliant, physically frail daughter of an affluent physician of highly assimilated Jewish Alsatian origins. He

Francine du Plessix Gray writes the "At Large and At Small" column each summer. Her biography of Simone Weil was published this June in the Penguin Lives series. Her previous book was *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life.*

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was uneasy about his background and did not tell his children that they were Jewish until they were on the verge of adolescence. Weil's self-punitive streak and her obsession with social justice were already evident in childhood—at the age of ten she was reading a dozen newspapers a day, bemoaning the harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty, and rising at 2:00 A.M. to do her homework. Throughout her youth, she felt painfully inferior to her older brother, André Weil, a prodigy who was to become one of the two or three most distinguished mathematicians of the postwar era. By the time she had graduated from the Ecole Normale Supérieure, her outspokenly radical views had earned her, in Parisian academic circles, such epithets as "The Red Virgin" and "The Categorical Imperative in Skirts." Skeletally thin, churlish and awkward in manner, her beautiful eyes shielded by thick spectacles, her femininity veiled in drab unisex garments, Simone drew the bemused attention of Georges Bataille, who described her thus when she was in her twenties: "Always *black, black clothes, raven's wing hair, pallid* skin. . . . This was certainly an admirable being, asexual, with a sense of doom about her. Her undeniable ugliness was repellent, but I personally felt that she also had a true beauty . . . she seduced by a very gentle, very simple authority."

On and off for seven years in the 1930s, Weil taught in the French lycée system. She also acquainted herself thoroughly with blue-collar issues by working on the production lines of several factories and by taking on grueling jobs as farmhand and union organizer, experiences that soon led her to become disaffected with the Marxism of her early youth. Her brief participation as a Republican volunteer in the Spanish Civil War—cut short by a leg wound—led to further disillusionment with left-wing politics. Severe secularists might see a causal chain between that series of disenchantments and the religious epiphanies that she began to experience just before World War II. The rest of her life was centered on a quest for martyrdom. In June of 1940, although she desperately wished to remain in Paris and join an early Resistance unit, she fled the city with her parents, with whom she had exceptionally, if not neurotically, close bonds; her sole reason for leaving with them was to get them eventually to safety in the United States. The Weils were able to come to New York in 1942, where Simone spent only a few months before returning to Europe and joining the Free French in London. She died there in 1943, at the age of thirty-four, of tuberculosis complicated by self-induced starvation. Anorexia had plagued her since adolescence but was never mentioned by her early biographers: Dr. Weil, who survived his daughter by fifteen years and insisted on censoring anything that was written about her, adamantly denied that diagnosis, perhaps because of the social opprobrium then attached to the disease.

The Weil family indeed confronts us with a fable on the dangers of all kinds of denial and, in particular, on the perils of over-assimilation. And I think most of Weil's readers will sympathize when I single out her troubling views on Jewishness—a network of attitudes that I prefer to describe as anti-Judaism rather than anti-Semitism—as the aspect of her *thought that arouses my deepest hostility.* Weil's feelings on this issue come to the fore in an angry letter she wrote to the French Minister of Education in 1940, when the Vichy government passed legislation prohibiting the employment of Jews in government schools. It begins:

> I don't know the definition of the word Jew, this subject has never been part of my program of studies. Does this word designate a religion? I have never entered a synagogue and I have never witnessed a Jewish religious ceremony. . . . Does this word designate a race? I have no reason to suppose that I have any sort of tie, either through my father or my mother, with the people who lived in Palestine two thousand years ago. Having pretty much learned to read through French writers of the seventeenth century, such as Racine and Pascal, if there is a religious tradition that I consider as my patrimony, it is the Catholic tradition. The Christian, French, Hellenic tradition is mine; the Hebrew tradition is foreign to me. . . . If nonetheless the law demands that I regard the term "Jew," whose meaning I do not know, as an epithet applicable to my person, I am disposed to submit to it as to any other law.

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What is most disturbing about this darkly ironic passage is that it does not protest a racist decree that will deprive hundreds of thousands of Weil's people of employment; it solely vents her anger at being defined as a Jew. Equally distressing is that this letter of 1940 is the only occasion on which Weil ever admits her parentage, and she admits it, this one time, only to berate and repudiate it. Weil's abjuration might well be seen as a negative example of what the French scholar and Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry has called "catastrophe Judaism." Améry coined the phrase to describe the experience of highly assimilated Jews previously indifferent to their heritage (France was especially rich in them) who were forced by the rise of Nazism to confront their Jewishness. Unlike Henri Bergson or Edith Stein, however, who reacted to this confrontation with a deepened sense of solidarity with their fellow Jews, Weil's negative form of "catastrophe Judaism" leads her to remain pitifully angry and alone as she vents her Jewish self-loathing.

Another alarming example of Weil's anti-Judaism occurs in an essay of 1938, in which she argues the Lesser Evil principle by asserting that France should not go to war with Germany over the Sudetenland. Her rigid pacifist principles overrule all other political scruples when she suggests that by letting Germany occupy the Sudetenland, not only would the European powers be helping to redress an injustice, but there would be "less chance of leading to a war." As to the consequences of the Nazis' anti-Semitic policies in an occupied Sudetenland, Weil has only this to say: "The Czechs could ban the Communist party and exclude Jews from all relatively important positions without losing anything of their national life."

Weil's remarkable blindness to Nazi Germany's threat to her people can be clarified, but not condoned, by noting that she suffered from a syndrome chronic to France's left wing—communal self-castigation about French colonial policies. The following sentence exemplifies the supreme importance Weil placed on the colonial issue and the often perverse logic with which she pursued it, at the cost of all other considerations: "In my view, there would be less shame for France even to lose part of its independence [and here she means Nazi occupation] than to continue trampling the Arabs, Indochinese and others underfoot." Whether or not another world war would be a disaster for the entire world, she argued, a German domination of Europe, "bitter as the possibility may be," would not be a worse prospect, in the long run, than France's colonial domination. In his great book *Strange Defeat*, Marc Bloch singles out this aspect of French prewar cynicism as one of the pivotal elements that contributed to the fall of France in 1940. And one can at least give Weil credit for her later change of heart: after the *débacle* she would berate herself agonizingly for having once held these naïve and utterly shocking positions.

Weil's view of Judaism's place in history is equally askew. A tirade against the Old Testament from her famous essay on Homer's *Iliad*: "Everything here is of a polluted and atrocious character . . . beginning with Abraham, right down through all his descendants." Weil was not totally condemnatory of the Jewish tradition; she found much to redeem it from post-exilic times on—in Daniel, Isaiah, Job, the Song of Songs, some of the Psalms. But her overall judgment of Judaism remained brutal: "I have never been able to understand how it is possible for a reasonable mind," she wrote, "to look on the Jehovah of the Bible and the Father who is invoked in the Gospel as one and the same being. The influence of the Old Testament and of the Roman Empire, whose tradition was continued by the Papacy, are to my mind the two essential sources of the corruption of Christianity."

In sum, Weil refused to accept the assertion, central to Christianity's Nicene Creed, that God had spoken through the Jewish Prophets. And ironically, Weil's rejection of Israel—her sense that the Catholic Church was made all too Jewish by its embrace of the Old Testament—was the major stumbling block to her entrance into the Church. One has nothing but compassion for the learned Dominicans and Jesuits who were relentlessly grilled on this issue, as well as on Weil's other bizarrely syncretic views, during her last two years of life. Could she be baptized, she demanded to know, if she wished to ban the Old Testament from the canon of the Church? And, in the same breath: Could she enter the Church if

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she believed that there were incarnations of the Word prior to Christ—say in Orphic mysteries, in Chaldean and Egyptian oracles, in Taoist sages, in Osiris and Krishna? Or if she believed that the knowledge of God given to non-Christian persons in contemporary India was as genuine as the knowledge of God offered to Christians?

There are many other aspects of Weil's thought that make me want to throw a book at her, such as her Gnostic view that the physical world, particularly the body, is the source of all evil (a belief she practiced in real life by gradually destroying her own body). But a recital of further griefs would leave the impression that my attitude to Weil is negative rather than ambivalent, and I'd like to elaborate on some of her admirable traits. So here's to occasionally loving Weil!

First of all, I admire and revere what I like to call her intellectual bulimia. I cherish the sheer omnivorousness and energy and restlessness of her mind, a mind that dwelt with equal passion on the Greek classics, on geometric theory, on political history, on folklore, on art history, a mind that reveled in intellectual gymnastics for their sheer joy. I treasure the essays that touch on her philosophy of human freedom and drive home her central themes—that all men who exercise power over others inevitably destroy themselves; that violence is equally degrading, if not equally fatal, to those who impose it and those who suffer from it; and that the only road to wisdom is the Aeschylean path of "suffering into truth." Many such writings, such as "Oppression and Liberty" and "The Iliad: or The Poem of Force," the latter of which also displays her considerable (if idiosyncratic) skills as a classicist, will remain landmarks of moral and political theory as long as civilization endures.

I cherish Weil's journals, in which she uses an aphoristic form derived from the terse, concise tradition of La Rochefoucauld and Pascal. Like theirs, her aphorisms are full of traps and ruses, rather like beautiful but treacherous orchids: the surface of their diction is so seductive, so glisteningly elegant, so startling, that one easily gets ensnared in them before realizing that they may be totally off the wall, and part of the fun of studying them is deciding whether or not to gamble on entrapment. I offer one such epigram: "God is proven in some way by the extreme difficulty of believing in Him." Brilliant! I think at first. *Quel sens du mot juste!* But then it dawns on me that this may be just another verbal orchid—gorgeous, sexy, and dumb. On the other hand, there are some aphorisms in Weil's journals that have as much resonance as the best Zen *koans*, such as the following, written when she was only sixteen: "I must be devious, cunning, I must set myself obstacles that lead me to where I want to go."

Among the high points of Weil's oeuvre are the spiritual jottings she made during the last two years of her life as she struggled, in her ultimate act of self-denial, against the happiness she would have received from being baptized into the Church. These musings can be found in her books *Waiting for God* and *Gravity and Grace*, in her Marseilles and London journals, and in her correspondence. Many of these passages draw upon the rhetoric of paradox and contradiction familiar to all mystics, and their images of abnegation and absence are clearly influenced by her studies of Taoism and Buddhism: "There are people who are saved by those things which bring God nearer to them, for me it is everything which keeps Him at a distance." "If God becomes as significant to us as treasure is to a miser, we must tell ourselves that he does not exist." An enigmatic phrase from one of her letters to Father Couturier, the great Dominican priest and scholar, with whom she had an extensive correspondence in 1943, leads us to the heart of her decision not to be baptized a Roman Catholic: "The desire for and deprivation of the sacraments might constitute a contact more pure than actual participation in them."

Along with Weil's literary genius and the dense challenges of her religious thought, I admire the unstinting charity of her character, the recklessness with which she poured herself out to others. There was much of the Holy Fool about Simone: she was so awkward and so chronically forgetful of her bodily needs and comforts that she could barely dress herself properly. Her lycée students lovingly protected her from her own clumsiness, helping her tie her shoes and turn her sweaters right side out. They were moved by the

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prodigal patience and generosity with which she tutored those weak in Latin; the thoughtfulness with which she visited lonely boarding students on holidays; the speed with which she returned their papers, beautifully corrected and pocked with cigarette burns. Her halo of voluntary poverty, her threadbare vestments and naked sandaled feet, her ascetic and truly Stoic indifference to her physical self touched them deeply. "Her piercing look through the thick glasses, her smile"—so one student remembers her—"everything about her emanated a feeling of total frankness and forgetfulness of self." Weil was secretive about her benevolence and committed a multitude of charitable acts that her students would have admired if they'd known about them. Racked with guilt at the thought that graduates of Normale received the highest teaching wages in the country, she retained only what she would have earned as a "non-agrégée" beginning teacher and gave the rest to a fund for the unemployed. When teaching at Le Puy, in the center of France, she rose at 4:00 A.M. twice a week to take a three-hour train ride to the industrial town of St. Etienne, where she taught classes in Latin and French to factory workers. In the winters of 1940–1942, when exiled in Marseilles, she saved up her food coupons and gave them to a community of immigrant Indochinese workers.

It was clearly this directed waste of self that has led some to claim sainthood for Weil. And like that of many people we think of as "saintly," her self-abnegation often presented huge difficulties for others. I'm reminded of G. K. Chesterton's comment, in his book on St. Thomas Aquinas, that the saint, precisely because he is an "antidote" to the ills of our society, is often looked on as "a poison." No one has better testified to the rather poisonous hardships occasioned by Weil's search for holiness than Gustave Thibon, a French farmer and theologian for whom Weil worked as a farmhand in 1941. Her complications plagued the Thibons from the moment they met. Simone refused the bedroom they had prepared for her in their modest house, finding it "too comfortable," and declared that she would sleep outdoors. With some persuasion, she eventually compromised on a half-ruined little hut on the banks of the Rhone, two and a half miles from the Thibons' home.

In the evenings, Simone helped Thibon, who was an authority on St. John of the Cross, to improve his Greek, reading Plato's *Phaedo* with him in the original. He heaped praise on her gifts as a teacher. "She knew how to place herself on the level of any pupil whatsoever," he recalls, "and brought to the task . . . that quality of extreme attention which is closely associated with prayer." However, there are interesting critical undertones in Thibon's sagacious summation of Weil's character. He noted that although she longed above all for detachment, "she was not detached from her own detachment." She did not seem to realize, in fact, that she caused problems for others when she went about her extremely self-centered goal of self-effacement. Remarking on her near-starvation diet, for which she always pleaded the excuse of wartime rationing, Thibon noted: "This soul who wanted to be flexible to every movement of the divine will could not bear the course of events, or the kindness of her friends, placing obstacles in her path of self-immolation . . . the way she mounted guard around her void still displayed a terrible preoccupation with herself."

Which leads me to make the important link between mysticism and anorexia: One might well remember that eating disorders are more the rule than the exception in the female mystical tradition—Saint Clare of Assisi, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Elizabeth of Hungary are some of the visionaries so afflicted. But in Weil's case, "Holy Anorexia," to use Rudolph Bell's paradigmatic phrase, was further complicated by a particular brand of mystical chauvinism that had to do with France's political condition in the 1940s—its humiliating defeat and its wartime suffering. There is a form of intense patriotism—particularly widespread among, if not unique to, the French, and well exemplified by Charles Péguy—that leads the citizen to identify corporeally with the mystical body of his or her nation. One particularly astute chronicler of Simone's personality, a medical doctor who had known her since Normale years, observed that her proclivity for self-mortification and her tendency to undernourish herself greatly augmented throughout the war years. "Never until the war . . . had she carried her privations as far as she did now,"

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he wrote in 1942. Simone seemed impelled, he observed, to mutilate her body in pace with the progressive collapse of France, to engrave her country's suffering into her very flesh.

I seem to have unwittingly returned, full circle, to Weil's more perplexing traits. And before ending, I'll cite one more questionable aspect of her last years that troubles me as deeply as her anti-Judaism: her attitude toward the Free French. It bears repeating that the only reason she came with her parents to the United States (a country she was determined to hate, and that she hated just as much as she expected she would) was to get them out of danger. The minute she had settled Dr. and Mme Weil in New York—they lived at 546 Riverside Drive, where a plaque now marks the building—Simone started pulling every string she could in order to return immediately to Europe and join the Free French. Only highly accredited officials were then allowed to cross the Atlantic, but within two months she received the necessary papers through a close friend, Maurice Schumann, a future minister and highly placed Free French official. In the letters she wrote Schumann from New York, she insisted that once in London, she wanted to be parachuted into France to work as a liaison with the Resistance:

> I beseech you to obtain for me the measure of hardship and danger that alone can save me from being wasted by grief. . . . The suffering all over the world obsesses me and overwhelms me to the point of annihilating me, and the only way I can . . . release myself from this obsession is to take on a large share of danger and hardship myself.

And indeed, once in London, Simone persisted in her project of patriotic self-immolation. Upon arriving at the Free French headquarters, she immediately submitted her demand to be parachuted into France, a plan to which de Gaulle is said to have responded with the phrase *"Mais elle est folle!"* ("But she is mad!") She was told that she would be too readily uncloaked and might place comrade resisters in danger. (It seems that Simone's "Semitic" features and her notorious physical maladroitness were also important factors in the Free French's refusal to give her an underground assignment.) So instead of the heroic mission she had spent two years dreaming about, she was made an editor in the civilian department.

These vetoes were huge blows, and from then on Simone set out to destroy herself as fast as she could. She worked at her office on Hill Street into the dawn hours, seldom sleeping more than three hours a night. Her headaches returned and worsened. Her cough grew more acute every week. She was obsessed by the sense that she had actively collaborated in France's defeat by supporting, until the very brink of the war, a misguided pacifist doctrine that had tragically failed. One of her letters from London refers to her "criminal error of pre–1939 days." This remorse was bound to reinforce the sense of worthlessness she had had since childhood, and it speeded her end.

And this is where I, personally, lose touch with Simone's inward state and relegate it to the realm of neurosis, if not psychosis. A clear sign of her twisted state of mind—and let's face it, of her self-centeredness—was that even the increasing prospect of an Allied victory in the spring of 1943 offered her little pleasure. As her London colleagues rejoiced over the Russian defense of Stalingrad and the definitive defeat of Rommel in Africa, what did Weil feel? She felt disgust at the power struggles the prospect of victory had inevitably brought to the Free French. She couldn't stand the notion that de Gaulle might be forming a political party (political parties were Weil's *bêtes noires*, a phobia repeatedly displayed in *The Need for Roots*, which she wrote in London). In May of 1943, she resigned from the Free French, stating her reasons in a long and vehement letter. Since she had been refused any mission with the French underground, she wrote, "I can not have, and I do not wish to have, any direct or indirect or even very indirect connection with the French Resistance." But by this time she was terminally ill. She had collapsed in mid-April and been taken to a London hospital, where she was diagnosed with tuberculosis in both lungs. She was immediately prescribed a more nourishing diet, but she still refused to eat any more than before, pleading that food rations in France had been further reduced.

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Her doctors declared her the most difficult patient they'd ever had.

One week before she died, Weil was transferred to a sanatorium in Ashford, Kent. Perhaps the greatest joy of her final two years of life was to notice that her last room faced south, toward France. Her death, on August 24, 1943, is far more mysterious to me than any outright suicide, even harder to decipher than the kinds of death other anorexics meet. Insofar as we can decode any person's emotions at such times, her attitude seemed to be one of apathy and detachment rather than active self-destruction. Without having decided to die, she may not have fought hard enough against it; she may not have sought death so much as cultivated that state of Stoic indifference she had long admired.

What makes me most uneasy about Weil's end, however, is the suicidal narcissism that pervaded her attitude toward a great and good cause, the Free French, to which my own father gave his life. I'm repelled by the possibility that Weil might have looked on the Free French as a vehicle for her own redemptive self-sacrifice. It is possible that such decisions lie beyond our moral judgment. It would be comforting to be able to say, as I could earnestly have said in my devout youth, that only God can decipher the true nature of such deaths. Since the chances of my returning to this state of faith are minimal, I suppose I shall always look harshly on Weil's way of ending her brief life, and persist, like many of her readers, in my mercurial pattern of alternately loving and hating her. And I might add that this ambivalence toward a subject of biography, which I share with many a chronicler of lives, can actually be a beneficent, if not a treasurable, attribute. It keeps us from falling into either hagiography or pathography. It helps us to maintain that objectivity, that ironic distance, that blend of severity and compassion, which should be the goal of all honest biographers.

As for Weil's relationship to the world at large, I think I know why she has become an iconic figure: She exemplifies a level of spiritual intensity that is not, could never be, our own. She serves as a kind of scapegoat for our unfulfilled impulses toward virtue and purity. She goes further than any of us would dare to venture in that direction—*she does it for us.*

J. C. FURNAS

1905 – 2001

Frequent contributor,

THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR

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The smile of the sea was a positive simper. Such a glittering and twinkling, such a softness and blueness, such tiny little pinpoints of foam, and such delicate little wrinkles of waves—all this made the ocean look like a flattered portrait.

—HENRY JAMES,
Portraits of Places, *1883*

What is the history of a river? It is surely not the same as the history of a country, or a city, or a nation, or a race. Nor is it merely a geologist's account of so much water wearing down so much rock into a valley and forming, with its sediment, so many miles of plain. Rivers are dynamic, even the quietest. They make a road and a living place for men. They give them power to use, they create trade, they invite battles, they determine, in some degree, the quality of cultures. More than any other agency of nature, they make the earth usable by man.

—HENRY SEIDEL CANBY,
The Brandywine, *1941*

COMMONPLACE BOOK

Water

COLLECTED BY
ANDRÉ BERNARD

Down we slipped through the water. As I have said, the first plunge erases, to the eye, all the comforting, warm rays of the spectrum. The red and the orange are as if they had never been, and soon the yellow is swallowed up in the green. We cherish all those on the surface of the earth, and when they are winnowed out at 100 feet or more, although they are only one-sixth of the visible spectrum, yet, in our mind, all the rest belongs to chill and night and death.

—WILLIAM BEEBE,
Half Mile Down, *1934*

Fabro told me, "I don't know exactly what has happened. I am the same person, yet I am no longer the same. Under the sea everything is—" He paused to be sure of what he wanted to say. "Under the sea everything is moral."

—JACQUES-YVES COUSTEAU,
The Living Sea, *1963*

The temple of Ammon is entirely surrounded by sandy and waterless desert. But in the center is a small area—at its widest it amounts to about five miles—full of fruit trees, olives and date palms, and it is the only place in the surrounding country where dew falls. A spring wells up there not at all like other springs which flow from the ground. For at midday the water is cold to the taste, and it is as cold as can be to the touch. But as the sun sets towards evening the water is warmer, and from evening it grows warmer still until midnight, when it is at its warmest. From midnight onwards it cools again, and at dawn it is cold, but coolest at midday; and it changes like this regularly every day.

—ARRIAN *(born c. 95 A.D)*,
History of Alexander, *III, 3-4*

When the last of the four great ice sheets was on the land, a mighty river gushed from the end of the glacier that had covered the Hudson valley and roared downward, cutting deep into the soft sediment of the former ocean floor, to a new shore line nearly 150 miles farther out than the old one. For thousands of years the great stream ran, constantly lowering its level and digging one of the deepest canyons the world has ever known. From a shallow beginning, as scientists have discovered by soundings, the floor of the gorge dropped steeply until in some places it reached a depth of 3,600 feet, a thousand feet deeper than the Royal Gorge of the Colorado. Had there been human life then, a traveler in a boat on the Hudson might have looked up to the blue sky between walls more than two miles high.

—CARL CARMER,
The Hudson, *1939*

Water is the only liquid which truly appeases thirst, and it is for this reason that only a small quantity of it is drunk.

—JEAN ANTHELME BRILLAT-SAVARIN,
The Physiology of Taste, *1825*

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While the Colonel was fishing, I lay out on the dry warm rocks with my book, quietly reading, surrounded by the deepening roar of the waters, and within a yard of the place where the white plunging foam, and the solid masses of deep, clear green water came rushing through the narrow channel. Then we moved again into quieter waters. The scene was very lovely and picturesque, the broad shining reaches of the river winding down between rocks and woods, gentle rushing everlasting murmur of the water, the sharp clicking of the reels, the low voices of the men as they sat a little way off on the bank, the Colonel in grey standing out on the rocks like a heron fishing and Charlie standing like another heron up the next broad bend of the stream, while a stranger sat on the opposite bank watching us across the river.

—THE REV. FRANCIS KILVERT,
Diary, *June 14, 1876*

I have left to last the dynamic component of the city, without which it could not have continued to increase in size and scope and productivity: this is the first efficient means of mass transport, the waterway. That the first growth of cities should have taken place in river valleys is no accident; and the rise of the city is contemporaneous with improvements in navigation, from the floating bundle of rushes or logs to the boat powered by oars and sails.

—LEWIS MUMFORD,
The City in History:
Its Origins, Its Transformations,
and Its Prospects, *1961*

On land, when [the Romans] are attacking men and the works of men, they usually succeed since they can use their strength against forces similar to their own, although they do fail on rare occasions; but when they clash with the sea and the atmosphere and try to fight it out against them, they meet with great disasters. This took place then and has often happened to them in the past, and it will happen to them in future, until they cure themselves of that reckless belief in force which makes them think that, for them, every season must be a fit one for sailing and traveling.

—POLYBIUS *(born c. 200 B.C.)*
Histories *I. 37*

Some say that beauty ends where the blueness of the Ohio is drowned at Cairo in the green and yellow and brown of its merging. But have they seen the Mississippi at Natchez, tawny in the sunset, its river sky of crimson and indigo and gold plummeting from the bluffs to the flat green land beyond its western banks? Have they watched from the levee the lights of barge and showboat, so yellow in the thick, whispering night?

—HODDING CARTER,
Lower Mississippi, *1942*

Lying awake in Venice, when the wind blows hard, one hears the sea thundering upon its sandy barriers, and blesses God for the *murazzi*. On such a night it happened once to me to dream a dream of Venice overwhelmed by water. I saw the billows roll across the smooth lagoon like a gigantic Eager [*sic*]. The Ducal Palace crumbled, and San Marco's domes went down. The Campanile rocked and shivered like a reed. And all along the Grand Canal the palaces swayed helpless, tottering to their fall, while boats piled high with men and women strove to stem the tide, and save themselves from those impending ruins. It was a mad dream, born of the sea's roar and Tintoretto's painting.

—JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS,
Sketches in Italy, *1883*

Already the sand hoppers had gathered and were busy at their work of reclaiming to life in their own beings the material of the fishes' bodies. For in the sea, nothing is lost. One dies, another lives, as the precious elements of life are passed on and on in endless chains.

—RACHEL CARSON,
Under the Sea-Wind, *1941*

Dedication exercises for the restored College pump over the old well in front of Hollis Hall were held on Tuesday morning, June 16. Professor Samuel E. Morison's daughter, Catherine Morison, "unveiled" the new pump, and Professor Morison drew the water. Miss Morison gave the first drink to Henry Monroe Rogers [Class of 1862], the senior alumnus of the College, who remarked that water had been a great thing for humanity.

—Harvard Alumni Bulletin,
July 3, 1936

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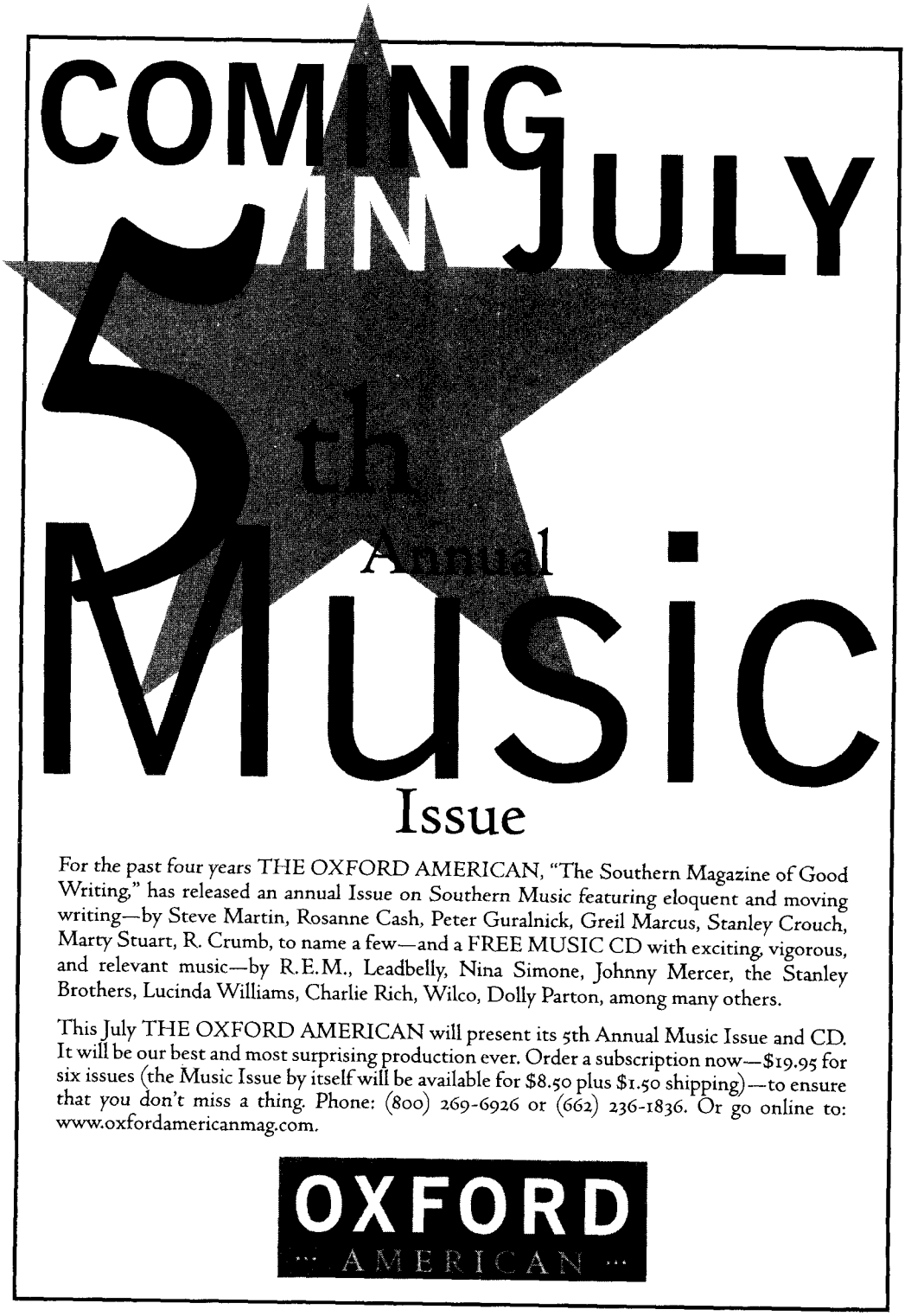

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The Mass in Spanish

Words and the Word

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

Ablaze with the spirit, days divided neatly. A cock's crow addled me in a gray light. By 6:30 every morning I had put on a thin pair of gum-soled canvas sneakers and left the house, trotting up the Via Nicotera toward the hills and the rocky path that ran along the edge of the mountain through the olive groves. Thirty minutes later I would sprint the last two hundred yards back into town, sweating, shirtless, making a bit of a show on the high street, just as the shop awnings began to open, the Vespa scooter-trucks buzzed to a stop for milk deliveries, the sun began to brighten the cool streets. My aunt would have laid out breakfast for her curious foreign houseguest: hard biscuits and milky coffee. And after a quick shower in a small semi-attached water room, I would sit before the vinyl mat laid over the primitive, solid table, and eat, wrapped in a towel. She seldom joined me at the table, more at home in the adjacent kitchen, drying dishes, already beginning preparations for the gnocchi, beef, beans, salads, fish, breads, and sweets that would be the evening's endless dinner. Zio Franco, my distant uncle, would usually choose to sit outside, on the stone balcony over the narrow street, watching neighbors pass, feeding the tortoise, collecting eggs from the squawking coop by the lemon trees.

I did not clear the table; such incursions into the domestic realm only annoyed my aunt. Offering thanks, I mounted the white marble steps, past the gravel-throated bird (who spoke Italian about as well as I), past the flowerpots, past the small shrine to my great-great-grandfather, with

D. Graham Burnett, Assistant Professor of History at Princeton University, is the author of *Masters of All They Survey* and *A Trial by Jury*, forthcoming from Knopf.

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its single, flickering orange electric candle. Then, to the room: the tall, narrow wooden door closing with a thump; the pair of louvered shutters folding back to reveal the view over the lapis bay—the slow gray mass of Vesuvius, the long bass clef of Naples already smudged by its own thick air. All morning I would sit there, at a desk facing the sea, studiously writing (longhand, in pasteboard books) an execrable adolescent novel about love, death, and God. Daily at noon I went to mass. After lunch and a short nap, the remainder of the afternoon consisted of conjugating Italian verbs, translating some Dante, and reading the Bible. Though it was winter, I would often—in the face of strenuous objections from the gallery of old ladies who spent the early evening visiting on the balcony of the family house—descend the 1,283 steps to the rocky outcroppings and truncated beaches below the town. There I would swim, and often fish, too, with a rod I had carried in my pack for the last year. I never saw in the water a living thing longer than my pinky: the shore was deserted; my casting an exercise in meditative futility, a plowing of the sea.

Though with family, I was very much alone: cut off by a small vocabulary, and cut off also by a cloud of small-town skepticism that greeted a youthful distant relative who appeared (announced) from months traveling in such a miserable place as India, where people were known to be largely lepers and skeletons. Upon my arrival my aunt (unannounced) discarded, and replaced, all my undergarments and socks, my prized saffron towel, and my sarong. When I objected, she brought in my uncle to clarify. A former member of an elite anti-smuggling unit of military police and still a giant, dark-eyed man with a thick mane of white hair, Zio Franco Rossano came in from his garden. *"Sporchi!"* he declared definitively (Dirty!), and went on to indicate that, as family, I was not to be seen in town looking like a vagabond; nor would such items be placed on the family wash line. Appearances were to be maintained. And, on the subject, would I like two eggs, still warm, to suck from the shells? I looked thin to him. A complicated story of many months in the subcontinent translated awkwardly into my phrase-book Italian: the family summed it up in a single word, which they offered me, and which the black-garbed ladies on the balcony often repeated, for emphasis and clarity, when I was introduced: *Miseria! Ay, India, tanta miseria! La miseria!*

This was not wrong, of course: misery I had seen. Reluctant to put the family off, I did not share my leper stories, did not describe the twisted fragments of human beings who would at times crawl through the marketplace in Kanpur, taking coins between knuckle-like fissures in ambiguous appendages. Ever in search of the sublime, I had made my way to an outlying leprosery in Uttar Pradesh, where I fed hot patients, touching their hardened skin. Afterward, in my journal, I wrote with the self-conscious pride of a nineteen-year-old embarked on a Grand Tour of human suffering, "I have touched a leper."

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I got sick, too, and of this I said not a word. Alone in a small village in the foothills of the Himalayas, I had begun to suffer from debilitating gut cramps and fever. I had thought—with all the melodrama of youth, with the hypochondriacal anxieties of a lonely traveler—that I was going to die, probably from appendicitis. It snowed. The woman who kept the empty house where I stayed gave me a brazier, but no charcoal, which was strictly rationed. I wandered around the village in muddy slush and paid an exorbitant price for three dung balls enriched with charcoal dust; they smoked and crackled next to my cot. I dozed for several days, listening to the scurrying of meaty rodents across the corrugated tin roof. I prayed a great deal. I read psalms. I got better. I felt I had been saved by God.

God came with me to the little town of Vico, a cluster of thick houses on the Sorrento Peninsula, the town my great-grandfather had left in 1903 to go to New York to study medicine. I arrived in Italy via the overnight ferry from Greece, after making my way through Eastern Europe. My passport sported some unlikely entries, and consequently, at the customs post in Bari, groggy from a night on the deck, I found myself eyed suspiciously. The rainbow-hued visa for India stopped the shuffling fingers of the abundantly frogged officer in a black beret. My pack and its curious attachments (the fly rod and kit) received scrutiny. Pulled from line, I spent five hours with a pair of quizzical German shepherds in a small shed on the quay.

God came with me to Vico, and the family did not know quite what to make of it. No one had any objections to saying one's prayers, naturally, but the young American's fervor fit into no recognized category of late-adolescent male behavior. That I spent two or three hours a day reading the Bible on the balcony came to be a subject discussed in assembly at family dinners: discussions that I followed unevenly, but that often ended with my uncle attempting to explain to me how many illegitimate children had been fathered by the local prelate. Zio Franco had no great affection for the clergy. The women of the house, in general, seemed better disposed toward the outward signs of my religiosity, at least at first.

For my part, the months remain marked as a kind of climax. The oddly mystical Catholic sensibility that had been mine from the age of ten or eleven blossomed in that publicly lonely period in the thick stucco house overlooking the bay. By the end, I could be found in my room after mass, on my knees, waiting for an apparition. I was increasingly certain that the moment was upon me, that the Beatific Vision would shortly be made manifest before me, luminous, pale blue, kindly; to me, it seemed only a matter of time.

Of these ecstasies the family knew nothing. But they knew I went to daily mass. I could tell that no one wanted publicly to object to this display of piety, but it was clear my uncle thought it odd (that part of odd

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on the cusp of ridiculous), and my rotund aunt shuffled about with a knowing smile on her half-averted face as if there were some joke we shared about my afternoon pilgrimage. At mass I prayed, drinking in the sense of a self called back from the grave for some divine purpose—a purpose I dimly supposed would involve saving India. I was the only man (excepting the potent celebrant) and the only person under sixty in the church, a bright little building adorned with dozens of votive paintings presented on the occasion of local shipwrecks—perspectiveless storm paintings in which a luminous Virgin hung in black clouds over the hulk of a mastless ship. On the fourth day of my attendance, at the close of the service, I exited onto the small, fountained plaza and found myself confronted by a phalanx of stout-bodied women, several in widow's weeds and the rest in shapeless smocks, their gray hair up in sensible arrangements. A woman with very few teeth seemed to have organized the party, and she addressed me challengingly, in words I could not parse. The first word I understood was "son," and she seemed to be posing a question. "Do I have a son?" No. "Do I know the son?" In a manner of speaking. The use of the third person confused me: "Who is he, the son?" they seemed to be asking. He is God's Son, I offered, hopefully. They seemed taken aback. "Whose son is he?" they demanded again, with greater communal animation, and a finger in my breast. And I understood. They were asking whose son *I* was (using the respectful form of address, the third person singular); they wanted to know just whom they were dealing with.

I introduced myself, correcting my hesitant suggestion that I was the Son of the Almighty, making it clear that I was a distant cousin of the Rossano family. Joy all around. They wanted to know my name, which I gave as *Davide,* since my first name is David, and Graham, I had discovered, brought blank stares in the south of Italy. *Davide.* The ladies seemed very pleased.

Thus began my local canonization. Zio Franco wore his puckishly mock-stern face the next evening at the table, playing *scopa* with his (ancient but sharp) mother after dinner. Crushing out his cigarette, he rose, went into the pantry, and emerged with a large and ornate peach tart, which he put down in front of me, announcing wryly: *"Per San Davide!"* My aunt gave a hearty guffaw. As it turned out, this tart and many more to come were gifts from the group of older widows and religious ladies from mass, who had decided that I showed signs of a peculiarly intense relationship to the Most High, and who had approached my known-to-be-impious uncle to warn him that he had a saint in his house. No one in the Rossano household could disabuse them of this idea, and I suspect rumors of my Bible reading leaked to the marketplace. Over the next weeks more little offerings appeared: bags of fruit, sweets, nuts. One of the women ran a fruit stand, and I learned that if she caught sight of me on the street, I would not be able to separate myself from her until I

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was carrying four or five kilos of peaches, plums, sweet lemons, bitter oranges. In the house on the Via Nicotera, the "Saint David" moniker had stuck. Embarrassed, I prayed harder than ever.

When I told bits of this story to my future wife, years later, she countered with a confession of her own: As a girl, she had believed intensely that she was the second coming of the Messiah—an unwelcome idea that brought untold terror to a light-eyed Puerto Rican eight-year-old. We exchanged these tales for the first time in a small, hot room in a decidedly third-class pension in San Jose, Costa Rica, a place we had ended up after deciding that we needed to get to know one another. It worked. For two months we crisscrossed this narrow isthmus of a country, making our way along a well-grooved circuit from beach to rain forest to volcanic springs and back to beach: I was reading *Moby-Dick* and trying to catch a *guapote,* or "peacock bass," on a fly; she was reading *Othello* and worrying about what her grandmother would say if she found out her *nieta* was traipsing around Central America with a young man she barely knew. We talked about religion incessantly. She thought of herself as an atheist; I remained a relatively serious and practicing Catholic. To amuse ourselves we played cribbage or read particularly ridiculous bits of *All the Pretty Horses* out loud in exaggerated Mexican accents. We were falling in love. Several months later I would propose, and she would come and join me in England, where I was doing my graduate work. A year after that we would be married in the Cathedral in Old San Juan, in a Spanish mass; she would receive communion for the first time since she had left the church at the age of eighteen. At the time this pleased me a great deal.

How does a child come to think of herself as the Messiah? How does one become a mystic? How do we learn to think better of these visions? Spelunking into the recesses of memory seems the only way to reconstruct how God comes distressingly close, and then seems to wander away. Several years ago, a traveling companion and I passed evenings on a long trip by practicing what we called "memory-diving." It worked like this: A subject was proposed—say, for instance, rivers—and we would alternate narrating our associated recollections as richly as possible. These might include earliest memories of a river, archetypal experiences of rivers, long-forgotten riparian dreams, and so on. Hours of meandering in the labyrinthine passages of memory produced a thoroughly hypnotic effect. I recall wending our way through one of these sessions deep into the night, sitting on the terrace outside the small room we had rented, which was built into the wall of the Rajasthan fort-city of Jaisalmer and looked out on the dry expanse of the Thar Desert. It was the middle of *Holi,* the Hindu feast days of colorful play, and we had spent the day dodging hyperactive children armed with paint bombs and Technicolor squirt guns. We turned to religion, and the assignment was to produce our earliest

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recollections of an attempt to communicate with a god. His went this way: The night his childhood dog died, he had walked out into the woods behind his Colorado home and desecrated the earth—pulling up saplings, breaking the low limbs off the aspens, stomping down the wildflowers. God, he decided at seven, needed to be addressed, and he sought to strike the Creator in the delicate pressure points of His creation.

For sheer blasphemous defiance, his moonlit scene rivals for me the great God-spiters of myth and literature: Dante's Vanni Fucci, looking solemnly up to Heaven from Inferno XXV and flipping the Almighty the thirteenth-century equivalent of the Italian salute; Prometheus himself, writhing on his rock, forever unrepentant. Less triumphantly existential, my own earliest memory consisted of an inward structure, akin to a great stack of long corridors, through which I would move as I lay in bed. After floating the axis of each hall, I would seek audience with the Divinity, learn that I was not yet deep enough, and be invited to go down another level, where the process would repeat itself, over and over again, until I drifted off to sleep. Perhaps our respective overtures to God intimate our later preoccupations: my traveling companion has since become a biologist with a particular commitment to ecology and environmental conservation; I have become a historian who focuses on travel and exploration.

My companion, as his early memory might suggest, left off concerning himself with God when he was young. He had, it seems, spoken his piece—once—in the only language the world-spirit appeared to know: the tongue of destruction. For me, however, the searching had only begun in the passages I made through the spirit palace in my head as an anxious child, predisposed to sleepless nights. That memory constituted my first recollection of *seeking* God, but I can recall several earlier instances of reasoning about God, among them one of my first memories of any kind. Working on a wood-block puzzle that depicted a corpulent pink elephant standing in a flower bed (I was perhaps five), I suggested to my mother that God could turn flowers into an elephant. To which I think she must have responded that He *could,* but that it never happened because He never *wanted* to. I sense this must have been her answer because I went around explaining it to people for quite a while, substituting other transubstantiations for the floral-pachyderm metamorphosis that had served as my test case for omnipotence.

Omnipotence had proved relatively easy at first grasp, but omnipresence proved a tougher proposition. I cannot have been much older when my mother and I had a less successful exchange about the nature of the Divinity. Habit dictated that we said a decade of the rosary together each night before I went to bed, and while I was still learning my half of the Hail Mary and the Our Father, she asked me once simply to explain the meanings of the prayers as I understood them, rather than get bogged down trying to remember specific words. I recall very clearly paraphras-

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ing the salutation of the Our Father as: "Our Father who is *not* in Heaven," which elicited a helpful correction to the effect that, on the contrary, Our Father was very much in Heaven. I made a mental note, and said nothing, but I remember still my surprise. Not only did "art" (as in who *art* in Heaven) bear a strong resemblance to a negative (aren't, weren't, isn't . . .), but the very idea that God was *in* Heaven struck me as absurd, since I had understood very clearly that God was everywhere, which followed, evidently enough, from His being all-powerful. And anyway, I had been told that God was *in* me (and this certainly seemed right), but the idea that *Heaven* was in me made no sense at all.

Much later, reading Dante in college, I would learn the dominant conceit of Christian metaphysical writing: Theology, as a human enterprise, invariably fails to grasp its inhuman object; the only recourse involves the pursuit of ever more subtle metaphors accommodated to our intellect. Like the *Commedia,* all great theology is great allegory. In that caesura between the thing and the way we speak of it lies one of the deepest mysteries of being human: If there is something beyond what can be said, then there is the unspeakable, and this, we feel, is what we mean by God. I first peeked into this space when I confronted the meaning of a prayer I thought I knew. I understood: God was not in Heaven, but I and all those around me would always say that He was.

God was emphatically not merely in Heaven for me: From the age of ten on I moved in the company of a *daimon.* I sensed that the Almighty addressed me directly, and regularly, on matters specific and general. By nineteen, I had grown sufficiently accustomed to these oracular interactions that I could sit still and wait expectantly for a visitation in my ancestral home. The moment remains clear to me: kneeling in the room over the sea; the distinctive houseflies of the Mediterranean—with their penchant for sudden, angular turns—tracing precise polygons in the middle of the room; the patient ecstasy of the true believer on the threshold of revelation. How things have changed. Now I put my head on my pillow and when I say "God" it is a simple question that leads me to sleep, not direct address to a familiar spirit. The questions linger: How does mysticism happen? Where does it go?

How it happens. Perhaps mysticism is metaphor gone mad. Just as theology amounts to more and less sophisticated allegories that present the otherworldly and incomprehensible in worldly and comprehensible analogues, so for some this trope might start to read in reverse, turning the quotidian happenings of the ordinary world into numinous messages from the gods. This was surely my case. My callings never came to me as voices, neither booming God-tones nor seraphic twittering. Rather they came as the sudden, seemingly involuntary, realization that a given situation (scene, device, setting, word) *actually meant something else.*

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For instance, filling a bath at the age of fourteen, I noticed the flecks of foam on the surface and how they coalesced, divided, and drifted to the edges of the tub. This, I rapidly understood, represented the fullness of the universe, its plenitude and diversity under the watchful eye of God. It meant, naturally, that living beings could be found at various points in the vastness of creation. There is no way to describe this (curious) resolution of the exobiology question that does not lengthen into several clauses a sequence of interlocked observations that became manifest in a single instant: the tub, the universe; mankind here, other forms of life elsewhere.

Often these numinous encounters took the form of if/then scenarios. The most chilling of these, I recall, involved a small stone that I kicked absentmindedly on my way back to the tent on a canoe trip in my early teens. The rock, I knew suddenly, represented me, its course over the ground constituted the span and character of my life: If it went smoothly a great distance, I would live well and long; short or rough meant the reverse. The kick was my own to make. It is an indication of the seriousness with which I took these irruptions of superabundant meaning that I chilled and became withdrawn that night. I had squibbed the kick, sending the stone a distance that corresponded—I understood instantly—to an early passing at the age of twenty-three. For better or worse, I now write from the other side of my foretold death.

I am resistant to the language of psychoanalysis; resistant to "diagnose" (or have diagnosed) retrospectively a condition that falls, under current norms, in the category of mild mental pathologies. The case history, however, must strongly tempt the professional: My daimonic possession culminated in what looks straightforwardly like a case of obsessive-compulsive disorder. For a year I could not pass any bit of loose litter on the grass or sidewalk without sensing that the moment was a test of my willingness to humble myself and submit to divine will. Aware that this smacked of lunacy, I increasingly struggled to pass by. I wonder what I looked like to people on campus, a serious young man in a tie and jacket stopping as if suddenly halted by a bit, reversing direction a dozen steps, picking up a discarded can he had passed thirty feet back, and then continuing on his way. Perhaps fanaticism comes in little energetic clusters.

The few people who stayed close to me during this period knew that I was embarked on a particularly otherworldly enterprise. A family friend, a philosopher and thoughtful fixer, took me out for pizza. He wanted to know, apropos of my intimacy with the Divine, what I would do were I to receive a message to the effect that it was time to exterminate the old family philosopher-friend, i.e., him. I thought about this for a moment, slurped my Coke, and told him I didn't think I would get that message. He pushed. Yes, but what if I did? After all, Abraham had received such an instruction concerning Isaac. This I could not deny. I neither saw nor sought latitude for my reply: if the word was "snuff out Schulz," Schulz

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would have to go. Herr Doktor Schulz suggested I go and buy myself a copy of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and keep thinking about these matters. He let me know that he saw the whole business as a serious stumbling block in my development as an enlightened thinker.

I read the Kierkegaard and saw that the problem was not a new one. I read other commentators on a life of faith as well, none more obsessively than Aquinas, whose enormous effort to answer all possible questions struck me as simultaneously sublime and ridiculous. I felt that the *Summa* was a vast labyrinth: One could come to it with any giant and burning question about God, nature, or humanity. A look at the index promised a direct path to the answer. Flipping to the indicated page, one found that the issue had to be broken up into several promising parts, that each of these pulled one in a different direction, that within minutes one had marked fifteen related pages in four different volumes, and that full understanding of the answer to the original question seemed to depend on making one's way systematically through each of these subsections before returning to the principal question. This, of course, was just the beginning: Understanding any of the subsections seemed to depend on grasping yet another lattice of related bits, spread through still more diverse parts of this universal work. Hours and dozens of pages later, the thrusting query I had brought to the text—say, the origin of evil in a world created by a perfect God—would have dissipated into the effort to keep track of a raft of subtle definitions and variously overlapping categories. I found this delightful, though not, somehow, satisfying. The web of the text seemed to work to cushion every spiritual collapse, but it did not provide enough elastic virtue to throw me back up into the stars.

Thomas himself agreed, as it turns out. The story of his own direct revelation may well be apocryphal, but for me the legend held within it a parable for the polarity of spiritual life. It is said that as an old man Aquinas had some form of collapse while celebrating mass; that he withdrew for a time in silence; that, on addressing the shocked witnesses, he could say only, "Held beside what I have just seen, all my writing is as chaff." Before the incandescence of direct contact with the Divine, the *Summa*—for all its heft, for all the subtlety and brilliance of its reasoning—simply evaporated. This became the story I told myself when reason failed; for all the delights theological questions afforded the intellect, this whole enterprise—reasoning about God—was the merest frippery when one could catch a sense of the Divine in direct address. There was no substitute for the Word, the trembling imperatives one perceives without effort at appointed times.

For several years I taught undergraduate classes on the *Summa* as part of a great books curriculum. It is not an easy text to teach, precisely because no excerpt can really give students a sense of its mass and structure, and these are, in many ways, its most remarkable characteristics.

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How does one teach a labyrinth? You can sketch a map from above, but this gives nothing of the experience of meandering through the halls and getting thoroughly lost; you can take students into a room or two to give them a sense of what it is like to be inside, but visiting a discrete room offers no sense of the pattern of passages. Doing research on the Web, I stumbled on a pedagogical solution: a Web site that presents the whole *Summa* in a sort of hypertext. Using it, students can "navigate" the text, moving down through the index to specific questions, back out to related questions and definitions. It is a text ideally suited to cyberspace—the anastomosing threads of the argument find a perfect analogue in the branching, looping framework of the hypertext. The students, adept at this sort of electronic reading, made their way through several assigned sections, and then followed my direction that they "surf" the *Summa* for an hour or so, long enough to get lost.

Words in webs make mazes, intricately hedged gardens for wandering and contemplating, but in Vico I had no interest in such leisurely promenades. My hero, by contrast, was Ezekiel, for whom words were not a vast and sprawling network but rather a tight little roll. Of all the pages I turned on that terrace under the lemon trees, no biblical story affected me as deeply as that of this prophet, whose "calling" seemed to capture the essence of divine address. Appearing before him, God presents a scroll, "written within and without," and says simply, "Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll." For me the lesson was clear: one did not seek to explain things using words; rather, one took the word in, as a form of communion. One wonders if there is not something archetypal at stake in the contrast between these two kinds of text: a vast hypertext of rational theology at one's fingers; a slim inscription on the tongue. They stand for words as reason on the one hand and words as revelation on the other. Here we have words vs. the Word. The former embodies the disseminative power of language—its ability to spin outward in widening and interconnected skeins; the latter shows the way words can work as seeds, as potent kernels—setting in motion vital forces, linking discontinuous realms. It is this latter *verbum* that is the special spell of the mystic.

If all theology is allegory, then all the words deployed therein amount to little more than an exhaustive circumlocution of the subject at hand. The membrane between the truth and the way we speak of it remains wholly intact, as the words remain here with us. They are our sounds and signs. They are dust we shake over the boundary between this world and the next, optimistic that, like iron filings cast on a sheet, they will move in sympathy with unseen and magnetic forces: We will not see the forces, or the magnet, but we will see something, and something not altogether insignificant. For the mystic, these patterns are not without beauty and meaning, but they do not satisfy. What is wanted in the place of these suggestive scatterings is nothing less than *the* Word, the word that is not

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the sound of a thing, not its tracing, not its reflection, but the word that is the thing itself, the word that is made thing. Presented with that caesura between things and the way we speak of them, the mystic seeks the epiphany of elision: For an instant the tissue separating us from celestial things (from truth, God, light) seems to yield, and we know all ultimates in that impossible way—directly. It is as if the vehicle of the vast metaphor of language were suddenly to collide with its tenor. For a moment world and Word are one.

In the final canto of the *Paradiso* the pilgrim, having made an allegorical journey through the whole of the hereafter, rises to the "top" of Paradise. There he will, for one moment, "see" God. It is at this point, and at this point only, that the accommodative allegory of ninety-nine cantos must dissolve: Here there is no "like" or "as," no "island" of purgatory or "rose" of Heaven. Without the conceit of allegory nothing at all can be said, and it is here, startlingly, that the poem ends. Words fail.

Obviously any of this language is itself an effort to put into words something that—if it is anything—is, by definition, beyond the scope of language. But the effort may yield some small fruit: For this business of the "word-made-thing" surely resonates with the opening of John's Gospel, "And the Word was made flesh." For Catholics it is indeed that flesh that one consumes in the sacrament of the Eucharist. If the flesh is the Word, and the bread becomes the flesh, then mass is a weekly rehearsal of Ezekiel's prophetic encounter. It is literally a "communion" with God: The elegant doublings of the world collapse as the communicant passes to a direct encounter with the very stuff of eternity. Like Ezekiel, the Christian mystic *consumes the Word.* This moment constitutes the center of the mass. So potent did this encounter seem to me that I remember fearing that the wafer would scald me were I not suitably prepared to receive it. Theology was a web of words, but the mass was a communion with the Word.

How does all this end? Not how does belief itself end—belief in some abstract sense—but rather how does the immediate and passionate belief of the mystic dissipate?

I suspect that all married people, asked to recall the ceremony of their marriage, see instantly in the eye of mind one or two still images, the brightest facets of the highly worked surface of the memory. For me the first such image is looking to my right to hand Christina the chalice as we knelt side by side at the altar. Here we were, in communion with one another, but she would soon be in communion with God as well. As I had come from a curiously divided family—my mother deeply and seriously Catholic (she the Italian), my father absolutely without religion of any kind—I was fascinated by the prospect of a marriage built around a shared spiritual life. It turned out to be much harder than I expected. For

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while I never doubted (indeed, do not now doubt) the seriousness of her "conversion" back to the religion of her grandparents, I could not exactly figure out (indeed, cannot now really figure out) what the whole business meant to her. Her earnest questions about the odder aspects of Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, gave me the opportunity to try to translate into words my own idiosyncratic, and often heterodox, perspective on the life of the soul. In trying to do so, in trying to put into words what had been the Word, I found myself talking rot, saying things I could tell rang false, things I myself did not believe. I was circumlocuting. I was translating, and things were coming back to me, as in the children's game of whisper-down-the-lane, unrecognizable.

There was also the simple problem of being decent. It turns out, I discovered, that it was much easier to be pious by oneself, where one seldom had to confront, say, selfishness, because one was, in fact, selfish all the time but, for the most part, there was no one around to point it out. After a squabble, before bed, I felt absurd trying to pray—getting on my knees before some vast deity when I had proved incapable of being a generous person in the most immediate and local setting. Prayer, it turns out, had been enormously dependent on solitude. Praying in front of Christina felt like a performance (as well as an odd sort of turning away from her), but praying with her felt thoroughly artificial. She was very candid that, committed as she was to the principles of Christian life, she found the notion of an intimate, personal God entirely alien. She had shaken her early touch of messianism, and had no truck with numinous communiqués from the beyond; the fact that I did made no sense to her. She saw Christianity as a way of treating others in the world, not a way of glowing from within as one left the world. I had tried to send my notion of the Divinity across the boundary between us, and in the process I was losing my grip on just what, precisely, I thought I was talking about. Leaving the company of this present, real person to drift in the company of an increasingly nebulous Almighty seemed at best foolish, at worst a betrayal. I had set off on a conversion, and had come back confounded.

The actual stuff of Christian doctrine did not help. From the enclosed world of my mystical devotions I had never taken the time to think seriously about the place of women in the Catholic church and of the broader implications of certain quite fundamental tenets of Christianity—the Virgin Birth comes to mind—for attitudes toward sexuality in general and women in particular. As for the nonordination of women in Catholicism, it became clear to me, with Christina's help, that it would be very difficult for us to raise a daughter in a community that argued that men and women had different sacramental relationships to God. Increasingly, I found myself, at mass, unwilling to say portions of the Creed. Christina, who knew the prayers in Spanish from her youth, had yet to learn them in English. We were both silent.

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We are past this. The escape demanded a change of venue: for her, toward something more familiar; for me, toward something less so. Christina and I still go to mass every week, but we assiduously avoid attending services in English. For the last four years we have attended Spanish masses in Hispanic communities in New Haven and New York. The shift has meant a scrim between me and the service, for while I can make my way through a text in Spanish, I am not at all fluent, and I find myself meandering through the words of the readings and homily, with a vague sense of what is going on but without a very literal sense of any of it. This gauzy experience is, for me, less and less about God and more and more about goodness in general and a vague longing for peace and justice. The denotative and potent words of the consecration follow the same cadences as in English, but they have become sounds for me, a pattern of devotion at one remove from my inner voice. Present, I am an outsider, and it is only this that lets me stay. The experience of the mass is no longer one of union and communion, but one of drifting, weightlessly, through music that seems familiar but remains always strange.

Of course, I had been to masses in many foreign tongues before this, but the language had always seemed incidental to the sacramental power of the event, which remained beyond translation. Now the foreignness of the language is itself a sacrament, an outward sign of an inward state of grace (or, in this case, perhaps the lack thereof). I simply allow myself to go to sea in the waves of senseless words that others are offering to God. If once I went to mass to taste that powerful scroll, now I go for the soothing sense of pouring myself out in a web of psalms and songs, arcane gestures, hand-holdings, signs of peace. From a sense that the mass took place between me and my God, I have come increasingly to think of its taking place between Christina and me, and between us as a couple and the other members of the congregation: I feel as if I have abandoned the Word for the words, abandoned the direct line for the vast network of believers who are the church. I once complained that the web of words did not have sufficient spring to throw me to the stars; now I am content that it holds me close, like a hammock, suspended at a great height over darkness.

I have lost something. Lost a bounteous certainty that came with gathering the seeds of heaven that I sensed fell to me at times, and that, nurtured, grew like the beanstalk of fable: grew until they pierced back into the heavens from which they came, affording passage to another world. But if once I had faith in the potent force of the Word, I have lately developed a new kind of faith in the web of words that I once despised. The Word may have the force to animate and impel action, but the meandering web of words possesses a kind of counter-virtue, a disseminative power. While once I thought of this as a mere maze, a distraction from the business of breaking through to the divine, I now sense that this

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centrifugal force of language has its own value in the context of the spiritual life.

For an example of this circumlocutory ethic, take the familiar story in John's Gospel in which the scribes and the Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman who has violated the law, and put to him the vexatious question of her punishment: Since Moses said she should be stoned, should she not be stoned? The evangelist records that in answer to this pressing juridical question, "Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not." When pressed, he utters the memorable encouragement to the sinless among the company—that they ought to cast the melée-launching stone. But then, immediately after speaking, Jesus is back at his inscrutable work, writing quietly in the dust, waiting for the crowd to disperse.

In this elusive gesture, I think, lies much of the story's power. For the crowd disperses slowly. Slowly. It takes quite a hungry, boisterous rabble to pulp a living person with loose paving stones. But the rising wave of their intention broke on the passive stillness of the Rabbi, and then it trickled away into the ring of grooves He traced in the sand. Here is a parable for the virtues of doodling glyphs absentmindedly in the dust, a parable of the virtues of getting lost in the web of things. The potency of divine direct address may impel us to action, but the meandering web of words, traced out before us at the right moment, can forestall disaster, can diffuse explosive forces. Many of our enterprises ought to be poured out quietly into runnels in the sand.

Increasingly attentive to the words, to the tracings in the dusty antiquity of the liturgy, I hope to throw few stones in this life; at the same time, I realize, I am not likely, robbed of divine fire, to "save" India or any other place.

"You know, Tembu," explains the failed storyteller Mira Jama in Isak Dinesen's majestic tale *The Dreamers,* "that if, in planting a coffee tree, you bend the taproot, that the tree will start, after a little time, to put out a multitude of delicate roots near the surface." These tendrils are rhizomic consolations—they spread out wide and the plant thrives, in its way: no fruit, only flowers. As Mira Jama puts it: "These fine roots are the dreams of the tree. As it puts them out, it need no longer think of its bent taproot. It keeps alive by them—a little, not very long. Or you can say that it dies by them, if you like." And so in faith there is a taproot, and it can be bent. The tree does not die, exactly.

How does mysticism happen? Where does it go? It comes from the sky, and it ends in the dust. It starts with powerful prayers, with a legible world, with fearsome messages that arrive unannounced. It ends in dreamy sleep, in the sweet muddle of foreign tongues, in words that say, but do not say—cannot say—the thing they mean.

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Rorschach's Rejected Blot

JEAN MONAHAN

He'd laid them on a table in the study
and one startled like thunder,
a cumulonimbus like a peony,
monsoon-worthy and fractured with electricity.
The first seven he felt sure of
ranged from black to gray,
wing-like protuberances and round heads,
here and there a dot of red for distraction,
clarity. And now just a few to choose
from to complete the set of ten,
a few strong in color, since color has a way
of distorting. One spoke of early ascension, as so many
things in his life did, one of permanent rupture,
one of vain and glorious destruction. But this one
like an oil spill left him troubled.
In his palm it opened like a vein, a poem
seeping in so many associations he couldn't
follow each river as it rolled and swelled
its bank, and he felt the blood pulled
strongly to his neck and strongly to his mouth
and he feared whatever it would have him speak of
if he allowed it breath.

Jean Monahan is the author of *Hands* and *Believe It or Not,* and the forthcoming *Same Difference* and *18th Century Zebra.*

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CORNELIUS EADY

How To Do

It embarrasses my niece to think of her mother
Walking the streets with a cart
Picking up empties
For their deposits,

But my sister knows how to *do*,
Which was all our mother asked of us.
She's learned how to *do*,
Which is both a solution and a test,

So I stand in line with my sister
At the supermarket.
Today's the best day of the week
To bring the bottles in.

It is a poor people's science,
A concept that works until
Someone with power
Notices it works,

And then, it doesn't.
There are at least 15 carts,
At least 10 people in line,

But only one guy
Behind the counter:
Not what's supposed
To happen.

The manager shrugs
His shoulders when asked.
No rules here,

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Points to a sign taped
Above our heads
Which, boiled down,
Says *wait, behave.*

No rules, except for
What's always been:
Do what you gotta do.

And the poor stiff

Whose job it is to sort the clears
From the greens, the plastics
From the cans, who is short
One or two people this shift,

Who flings my sister's
Stumpy treasure
Into the hamper's
Great indifferent mouth,
Temporary chief of staff
Of Lotto,

Who's been instructed to keep
The refunds down to
Twelve dollars' worth of
Store credit, no matter
How many empties
Come in,

Maybe he has a favorite song.
Maybe he's a good guy

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To have in a pinch.
He's not paid enough to reveal that here.

This, as my mother would say,
Is the way we have to do:
Tired as convicts, we inch along,
Shift our weight
On the black,
Sticky carpet,

Beholden to nobody's luck
But our own.

John Henry's Hammer

From that last spark,
I flew, a little, then landed,
Hard, still ringing from his grip, followed by
The rest of him. Our dust cooled
The afternoon heat. For a moment, we
Lay, larger than bets or bosses.
Then a part of me was a good man's ghost, a part of me
Got up, pounded the next man's wages.

Cornelius Eady, Writer in Residence at City College of New York, is the author of six collections of poetry, most recently *Brutal Imagination*.

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Ohio States

JEFFREY HAMMOND

When I was little, one of my favorite toys was an Ohio road map that my father picked up at a gas station. It was huge when spread out on the living room floor, large enough to nap on—though I would never have done that for fear of ripping it—and covered with an inexhaustible fund of words and colors and shapes. At first the map was simply a dazzling thing to look at, but once I understood what it was, it became magical. Here was an entire world cast into child-size, foldable form, gorgeous with red lines, yellow lines, hatched lines, double lines, clashing bright colors on the state borders, the deep blue of water. One starred city was our "capital," with other cities spreading out into irregular yellow shapes. There were hundreds of mysterious names and numbers and, here and there, tiny green pine trees and tents that meant, in one of my first experiences of legibility, "You can camp here."

I spent hours sprawled on my belly, tracing and retracing Ohio journeys with my finger. Once I learned that our house faced north (for a map-child, there was a profound rightness to that), I aligned the red, white, and blue Sohio ellipse at the top with our front door and imagined leisurely trips from this place to that and back again, always by a different route. These journeys usually started from our hometown, and always from a sense of well-anchored security that came from my opening ritual: Findlay, Ohio, is *here.* I am *right here.* When I was learning to read, I practiced with names on the map, eager to figure out where I'd been and where I would go next. Should I take the short, straight line up to Toledo, where the zoo was? Should I venture into the unknown—maybe south to wander a meandering black line leading to, say, Chillicothe? Or

Jeffrey Hammond teaches at St. Mary's College of Maryland and is the author of *The American Puritan Elegy: A Literary and Cultural Study.* This essay will appear in *Ohio States: A Twentieth-Century Midwestern,* forthcoming from Kent State University Press.

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should I trace one of the many routes to the sprawling yellow of Cleveland? Cleveland had a cluster of names so tightly packed I could hardly distinguish them, and I instinctively moved my finger more slowly in order to take them all in.

If you spend time playing with an Ohio map, you will become a whiz kid of Buckeye geography without even trying. I knew what lay northwest of what, where the rivers ran, how to get from point A to point B without ever having to cross a bridge. These were not insignificant journeys: the map reinforced a child's sense of living in a manageable, self-contained world—in my case, a world of wall-to-wall Buckeyes. I thought we were lucky. We inhabited a state whose shape was particularly satisfying. No characterless rectangle like Colorado, no vast expanse like Texas, no pinched-in afterthought like Connecticut or Rhode Island: Ohio seemed the perfect balance of nature and people, its boundaries a mix of lake and river and surveyors' lines. There was something for everybody, and as far as I was concerned, everybody who counted lived within its confines.

I knew, of course, that people lived in places called Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, but such places dropped mysteriously off the edges of my map, its red and black lines extending into a child's terra incognita. I still get a muted thrill when I think of those first pointers to the unknown—"To Erie," "To Detroit," "To Fort Wayne"—my versions, I suppose, of the ominous marginalia on medieval maps: *Here Be Monsters.* Not that I thought of Pennsylvanians or Michiganders as monsters, but I *did* assume that they were somehow different from us. Ohio's borders seemed to contain all that was knowable—and there was comfort in that. I didn't worry about these other places because they were for *later.* I couldn't know it at the time, but this was a typical assumption for an Ohioan, even a five-year-old Ohioan, to make.

The Sohio map instilled a habit of feeling situated in a landscape larger than what I could perceive. Years later, when I rode my bike out to the reservoir, climbed the embankment, and looked north, I imagined that I could almost *see* the skyline of Toledo, forty-five miles away, so strong was my conviction that it was there. The world—or more accurately, Ohio—felt like a palpable, understandable thing. Just beyond those trees to the southeast lay Carey, and beyond Carey lay Upper Sandusky, and beyond Upper Sandusky lay Marion and Delaware and Columbus, the city with the star.

The map prompted considerable curiosity about my state, along with the natural assumption that this curiosity could be satisfied, that Ohio could be mastered. How could it not? After all, I lived there—or rather *here,* in this smallish town located on the thin black line of Route 68 between Bowling Green and Arlington. As it turned out, however, Ohio was not as easy to read as those pine trees and tents. Individual facts (entered the Union in 1803; home of the Great Serpent Mound and the

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Olentangy Caves; birth state of General Grant, Thomas Edison, and the Wright Brothers) were straightforward enough, but not what those facts added up to. This became a problem—especially disturbing to a child devoted to the legibility of things. The more I learned about other states, the harder it was to pin down the essence of mine. I remember feeling jealous of how *identifiable* other places seemed. Texas had beef and oil wells. Wyoming had cowboys. California had the movies. There was Iowa's corn, Wisconsin's cheese, West Virginia's coal mines, Michigan's car factories, New York's crime—and so on. But what did Ohio signify? The nickname "Buckeye State" offered little help: what did that brown, shiny nut say about *us?* North Dakota, South Dakota, and Kansas seemed to offer similar blanks, but I didn't live in those boringly squared-off places. I lived here. The meaning of Ohio was *my* problem.

As I got older, my growing knowledge of Hoosiers and Golden Staters and Georgia Peaches, however slight, redoubled my efforts to get a handle on us relative to them. My search for the sum and essence of Ohio sent me back to the map. Maybe the town names would provide a clue. Like most children, I sensed the importance of names (just get a child's name wrong and watch the response: "I'm not John! I'm *Jonathan!*"). And if it's a big deal to have your own name or to name a pet, what if you had to name a town? This, I figured, was my key to Buckeye clarity. The people who had named our towns were pioneers, grown-ups who knew what they were doing. Surely they understood what Ohio meant.

My initial forays into Ohio's names boded well. My hometown, for instance, had been named for Colonel Findlay, a local hero of vague military significance. Heroes' names also graced Steubenville and Zanesville. Columbus honored an even earlier hero, though hardly a local one. It made sense, given my budding midwestern faith in progress and achievement, to name a place after a discoverer, a soldier, or a rich man who had coaxed a railroad or a canal to come *here* instead of there. These people had worked hard and played it smart and gotten ahead, all worthy activities. To name towns after such enterprising souls was a good deed, like respecting your elders.

This, then, was Ohio. Tennessee was the Volunteer State and Florida was the Sunshine State, but I lived in the Respect-Your-Elders State. It was easy to picture a parade of distinguished elders named Tiffin, McComb, Worthington, and Kettering. In my mind these Buckeye luminaries all resembled President Grover Cleveland, the inspiration, I wrongly presumed, for our biggest city. Mansfield gave me some trouble. Had a field once been owned by a man named Man? Had there once been a nearby town named Womansfield—the result, perhaps, of a nasty frontier divorce, Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher in buckskins?

I also discovered that you could name a town after what you found—

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or hoped to find—once you got there. Defiance and Independence were stirring examples of this, but what the settlers found was usually more down-to-earth. There was no great mystery to Rocky River or Springfield and its etymological twin Bellefontaine, once I looked them up. I could guess what lay beneath the hills of Ironton. Upper Sandusky made sense, too: it lay above Sandusky—that is, on higher ground than Sandusky, which was on Lake Erie and named, I assumed, for a distinguished elder called Mr. Sandusky. Middletown must have been halfway between two other places (lacking, of course, a distinguished elder named Mr. Middle). Then there was Akron, which always had a harsh, un-Ohio sound to it. Once I learned that the name was Greek for high place, the mystery vanished. Wasn't Akron the seat of Summit County?

So *this* was Ohio: the State of Respecting Your Elders in a New Place. But not all Ohio names started from scratch. People frequently named new towns after the ones they had left behind, though it seemed strange that anyone who had bothered to leave a place would want to use its name all over again. New Concord, New Boston, and New Philadelphia were obvious examples. I knew that there was a Dover in England, as well as an Arlington and a Kent. Once I'd seen in the dictionary that "Wooster" was how you pronounced the first two-thirds of *Worcestershire*—as in the steak sauce and the English county—another mystery was solved. Ohio also had a Cambridge, an Oxford, and a London, all of which must have been founded by Brits with big plans. East Liverpool made sense, too, until I remembered that it actually lay *west* of the Beatles' Liverpool. Maybe its founders had come to Ohio by way of China.

So far so good. Ohio was the State of Respecting Your Elders in a New Place but Without Forgetting Where You Came From. But I soon realized that Ohio's namers of things had embraced a far larger world than I first suspected. Toledo and Lima (pronounced *LY-muh*) were named for dreamy places where people wore colorful shawls, ate spicy food, and spoke Spanish. Milan (pronounced *MY-lun*) suggested elegant buildings and the Mafia. So did Parma, one of those squeezed-in names near Cleveland, and Ravenna, six inches southeast of Cleveland's sprawling yellow. Ohio also had a Lisbon, a Cadiz, and a Medina. And when I looked up Gallipolis, down on the Ohio River, I discovered that it meant City of Frenchmen. This did nothing to further my progress toward Buckeye clarity. How did a city of Frenchmen, berets at a tilt and wineglasses on their gingham-covered tables, square with my hometown of slim farmers and beefy, narrow-tie Republicans? What American Dream was reflected in towns named after Spanish sword centers, Inca capitals, and Muslim holy cities? Arcadia, ten miles northeast of Findlay, looked nothing like that peaceful shepherd place described in our encyclopedia.

Clearly, the state of Respecting Your Elders in a New Place but Without Forgetting Where You Came From or Didn't was getting out of hand.

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Where was the "Ohioness" in all this? And what to make of all the Indian names with their beautiful sounds and spooky reverberations? Although I had once believed that there had been a Chief Gallipolis, I soon learned that Ohio had plenty of legitimate Indian names to go around. Even *Ohio* was an Indian word meaning beautiful river. *Ohio River,* as our seventh-grade geography teacher pointed out, was a redundancy: the Beautiful River River. This was no help at all.

Echoes of the pristine, forested place that preceded *this* place—Ashtabula, Ottawa, Maumee, Miami, Wapakoneta, Coshocton, Cuyahoga Falls, Sandusky (there was no Mr. Sandusky, as it turned out), and Delaware—added to the incomprehensible mix of long-gone Buckeyes, a motley crew of Indians, Easterners, Englishmen, Germans, Dutchmen, and Frenchmen forming a swirl of Ohio ghosts, a midwestern Babel whose capital city was named after an Italian who didn't get where he was going and never really knew where he had been. I understood that the Indians had died off or headed out a long time ago. Their first stop westward must have been Indiana, where they managed to name another state before being shoved farther into the *real* West—the West that those clearly defined Californians showed us in the movies. Still, these names invoked tribal presences who spoke as loudly as all the others, and not just in the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo or in the warrior pictured on the label of the grape pop bottled in Wapakoneta, later famous as the birthplace of the first man on the Moon.

Indian ghosts might be peering sullenly out from the trees, but there were ancient Greek and Roman ghosts, too. This new knowledge demanded adjustments. When I read the story of Cincinnatus, Chief Cincinnati joined Chief Gallipolis in the happy hunting ground of nonexistence. For a while I even thought that the real Ohio was Roman at heart. To be called from your plow to defend your people and then to return to your fields afterward sounded quintessentially Ohioan, something that Grover Cleveland might have done. Never having been to Cincinnati, I imagined it as a gleaming cluster of temples and amphitheaters nestled on the banks of the Beautiful River River. The Romans, I learned, traced their ancestry back to the Trojans—and didn't Troy lie north of Cincinnati? Troy, Ohio, certainly had a ring to it, but was this the town that launched a thousand ships? When our family drove through on a visit to my grandparents in Illinois (a rare venture into terra incognita), I half expected to see spear marks in the storefronts. Instead, Troy looked a lot like Findlay.

Troy was obviously no Troy. Maybe, I thought, Ohio could be summed up more tersely than I had imagined: the State of Aiming High but Falling Short. Not far from Troy lay Urbana—City Town. But despite its founders' hopes, Urbana was hardly a city. There were lots of other remnants of lofty classical dreams: Attica, Delphos, Euclid, Utica, Bucyrus,

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Sparta, Macedonia, Minerva, Xenia, Antioch, Fostoria—Ohio's own city of light, from the Greek—and, more grandly, Athens, Rome, and New Rome. I figured that Twinsburg must have been named for those wolf-suckled Roman boys, Romulus and Remus. But the towns I had seen gave off little of the glory that was Greece or the grandeur that was Rome. I was beginning to think that Ohio was less a place of new dreams than of old daydreams. I could still imagine Cincinnati looking like a set from *Ben Hur* because I hadn't been there. I had been to Fostoria, though, and seen its narrow streets and abandoned glass factories. Clearly, something had gone wrong in our City of Light.

Where was I now? I was a citizen of Ohio—the Aim High Like an Indian or a Roman Even Though You Will Fall Short, and Respect Your Elders in a New Place and So Forth State. But forty miles southeast of the Greek high place where they made the tires lay the biblical high place of Salem. Ohio's rich supply of Old Testament names added yet another layer to the mix. I knew something about the Bible from Methodist Sunday school, and I guessed that those Salem settlers had aimed high with a vengeance. If you name your town after the Holy City, you probably aren't anticipating empty warehouses or juvenile delinquents. Ditto for the founders of Zion. But how, exactly, did biblical holiness connect with my Ohio? Was there a balm in Mount Gilead? Was the Hebron east of Columbus a city of refuge, like its namesake? And what about Lebanon, Zoar, Goshen, Galatea, Damascus, Berea, Gilboa, Palestine, and East Palestine? Did the flinty-eyed Ur-Buckeyes who settled these places hope to imitate the sanctity of those Bible lands? Did it make any difference that they would be substituting oats and winter wheat for date palms and olive groves?

I tentatively added "Be Holy" to Aim High Like an Indian or a Roman Even Though You Will Fall Short and So On and So Forth. After all, Ohio had St. Marys (both a town and a lake), Marysville, Marietta, and Marion, the latter the home of Warren G. Harding, whose unpresidential behavior surely fell short of the hopes of the town of the Virgin. Curiously, I never ran across a Jesus, Ohio. I supposed that such a name would create too much pressure. If a town named Jesus ever had a corrupt mayor or lost its only supermarket, despair would surely be loosed upon the land. There was no God, Ohio, either—the closest was Lordstown, with its huge GM plant—but that was probably a good thing. If there ever were a God, Ohio, it would surely become the adopted hometown of every politician in the state. "Friends, I stand before you as a man of God." Warren G. Harding would have moved there just to save face, though it probably wouldn't have done any good.

Given all these biblical names, maybe Ohio was simply God's Country. That certainly sounded like a fine thing, and perhaps capable of encompassing all the conflicting strands. But some Ohio towns seemed to reflect

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a flat-out opposition to God. Rome and Athens and Antioch might have been honorable classical places, but you couldn't be a pagan and a Christian at the same time, could you? Once I found out that these cities were also in the Bible and that Paul had tried to rescue them from false gods, I figured that a few old-time Buckeyes had intended to plant their crops and worship Mars. And what about Gahanna, on the outskirts of Columbus? The fact that it sounded suspiciously like Gehenna, Jerusalem's valley of death and hell, did not bode well. And if Ohio was really the Devil's country, what to make of all these Methodists and Baptists? Was there anything about my home state that wouldn't shimmer or break up, that wasn't canceled out by something else?

I began to suspect that no meaning was possible for a state that had been cobbled together from shards of this and that, a hopeless mix of conflicting dreams. Even individual dreams, on closer inspection, had a way of shrinking to insignificance. It was disturbing to learn that a number of proto-Buckeyes had established brassy, self-promoting towns. Moses Cleaveland—not President Cleveland—had founded our biggest city in an act, I thought, of monumental arrogance. A Connecticut lawyer, Cleaveland chose the site and immediately went back East. A newspaper later dropped the *a* to save space. The respectable President Cleveland, it turned out, wasn't even *from* Ohio. I darkly concluded that Colonel Findlay had probably pressured people to name my town after him. So much, I sadly concluded, for respecting your elders. So much for aiming high and being noble like an Indian or a Roman and being honored for it. So much for the meaning of Ohio.

I couldn't know that I had bitten off more than any kid could chew. Ohio really *is* an enigma, and not without reason. It has always been a place in which the past and the future count for more than the present. If you diminish the present, people will consider the very ground on which they stand to be temporary. This is a natural legacy of Ohio's long-standing status as a way station. Once the original "West," Connecticut's Western Reserve, to be exact, Ohio soon became the first Gateway to the West, a role that never ceased even as the frontier grew increasingly distant. Ohio was coming into its own just as those westward places were coming into *their* own, and the old thoroughfares—Zane's Trail, the National Road, the tight nexus of railroads—soon became funnels to get you *through* Ohio to somewhere else. The Erie Canal, which linked the East with the Great Lakes and created the ports of Ashtabula, Cleveland, and Toledo, soon became like that. Lake Erie led to Lake Huron, which led to Lake Michigan, which led to that big-shouldered Hog Butcher for the World and rail lines leading still farther west, where the real action was. The old railroads—the Chesapeake and Ohio and the Baltimore and Ohio—quickly outgrew their Buckeye dreams, too. Within a few years of

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its founding, the C&O had fossilized the "O" in its name by making Chicago its western terminus; the B&O did the same by extending to Chicago and St. Louis. Long before those Buckeye brothers Wilbur and Orville took to the air, Ohio was already becoming, in a phrase I've been hearing more and more lately, "flyover country."

Ohio's traditional role as the Not-Quite-West has always fostered among its citizens an acute awareness of the transitive. Even sixth- and seventh-generation Buckeyes, whose ancestors shod the horses and pumped the gas of more adventuresome souls as they passed through, retain a feeling of just marking time, waiting for their own chance to move on. Born observers of a passing parade, most Ohioans grow up assuming, rightly or not, that we will someday join it. It's hard to resist such thoughts if you live in a place that remains nobody's destination. Even today the Ohio Turnpike serves as a long bypass, traversing a Lake Erie plain that exists merely as ground to be covered by the steady flow of East Coast–Chicago traffic. Travelers a little farther south on Interstate 70, which supplanted the old National Road, roll through Columbus with Indianapolis beckoning as Oz, and St. Louis as a greater Oz. Interstate 75 similarly connects Detroit with points south, good weather, and Florida beaches ahead—though not soon enough ahead. Ohio is a perennial midpoint between desired ends, an entire state as Middletown.

The University of Akron has an uplifting but oddly poignant slogan that could stand for the state as a whole: "You can get there from here." The slumping midwestern economy has aggravated the old Buckeye itch to get there from here, or wish that one *had*. A charter member of the Rustbelt and a place of small farms unable to compete with modern agribusiness, Ohio has fallen hard over the past fifty years. Any middle-aged Ohioan will confess to nostalgia for better times. In 1950 Cleveland was the seventh largest city in the country, with nearly a million kielbasa-eating souls. Cleveland has since shrunk to half a million and now ranks twenty-sixth, though its metropolitan area still ranks a respectable fourteenth. Houston, in 1950 an upstart at around half a million, is now pushing two million—the equivalent of two 1950 Clevelands. When I was growing up, Ohio's factories, buoyed by frenzied postwar production, were stamping out steel, auto parts, and heavy equipment in record quantities. All that money brought other, less tangible gifts. Ohio State was number one in basketball and the Browns and Indians were champions in football and baseball. Jerry Lucas and Lou "the Toe" Groza and Bob Feller were fabled warriors of the Buckeye Golden Age, but like all Golden Ages, ours didn't last. Pushed by economic necessity, more and more of us have acted on the old impulse to join the caravan.

Half the people you meet in Sunbelt cities seem to come from Ohio, though Michigan might run a close second. An astonishing number of Texans and Floridians and Arizonans and Californians have Ohio roots,

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but they never describe themselves in such terms. Why proclaim yourself a former Ohioan only to watch your face lose its features? When a Texan moves to Cleveland, he's a Texan in Cleveland. But when a Clevelander moves to Houston he's a Texan, then and forever. There's no mystery to this: if you have no identity, finding one will feel intoxicating. That's why you won't see anyone in the bars of Dallas or Phoenix or Los Angeles hoisting a Coors to the ol' Buckeye State. You will hear no flushed, teary renditions of "Beautiful Ohio," even though its draggy waltz might have the ideal rhythm for drunks trying to sing. There will be no slurred toasts to Toledo or Dayton (the launching pads, respectively, of Gloria Steinem and Martin Sheen), no prayers for the deliverance of Steubenville (ditto for Dean Martin) or Cadiz (Clark Gable) or Fredericktown (Luke Perry). I'm beginning to suspect that Barberton (City of Barbers?) is called Magic City because half its citizens have vanished into thin air—which is to say, into the suburbs of Houston and Atlanta. If *Ohio* has become a word that an increasing number of Americans use as a synonym for the past, it's important to remember that we Buckeyes were born to this long before the factories closed and the small farmers went bankrupt. When I was a child and assumed that those states off the edges of my map were for *later*, I had already absorbed every Ohioan's innate sense of the transient.

When I moved east at the age of twenty-seven, I learned that my long-standing suspicions regarding Ohio's placelessness were true. In the past two decades I have heard people repeatedly confuse my state with Iowa or Idaho or Oklahoma. As a college teacher I frequently hear colleagues—smart folks and holders of Ph.D.'s—conflate Ohio State and Ohio University into an apocryphal University of Ohio, a thing to set Buckeye teeth on edge. For easterners, that old *New Yorker* cover in which the Hudson serves as a River Lethe to soft-focus oblivion was not far off the mark. Ask a New Yorker and a Philadelphian, if you can get them to stop badgering each other, and they'll agree that Buffalo and Pittsburgh are the ends of the line, twin gateways not to the West but to Palookaville. As for Ohio (East Coast people routinely infantilize the place by overpronouncing it *Oh-HIGH-oh* rather than the native *Uh-HIGH-uh*), "Fagettaboudit!" Cleveland is a blob somewhere between Here and Chicago. Columbus and Cincinnati, hovering in the uncharted ether between Here and St. Louis, are two more blobs in the vast blur of a continent that doesn't click into focus until L.A. smog and San Francisco fog render the world visible again.

Ohioans in exile are painfully aware of our nondescript origins. Whenever two of us meet on non-Buckeye soil, there is often a mutual cluck or a shrug, the subtle acknowledgment of people who once got minimally acquainted during a shared inconvenience like a delayed flight or a stuck elevator. Sometimes there's even a hint of admiration for

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another soul who found a way out. About the old sod itself, though, we have little to say. "I'm from Ohio, too." "Whereabouts?" "Zanesville." "Ah."

We Buckeyes have always known that ours is one of those placeless places, the ones that aren't labeled on national weather maps because people don't go there unless they have to. Watch an Ohio flight boarding, and the first thing you'll notice is that nobody is cutting in line. Pasty-faced businessmen lugging samples cases wait patiently behind sunburned Buckeye families whose vacations have just ended. Here and there, college-age Buckeye sons and daughters lug their backpacks through the gate with expressionless placidity. There are no reduced fares because, as the airlines know, an Ohio flight is a captive market, like the post office on April 15. If your sales territory includes Cleveland and Cincinnati, you will be flying to Cleveland and Cincinnati. That week at Epcot was great, but if you live in Akron, you'll be returning to Akron. When grandma dies in Toledo, you'll find yourself heading for a funeral in Toledo. This is the stuff of which Ohio journeys are made. Despite the recent hoopla surrounding the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame and the Indians' Jacobs Field, when was the last time you saw an ad for a vacation package to Cleveland?

By the 1990s, tourism was bringing over eight billion dollars to the state—about the same as Michigan, with all its lakes and forests. But these numbers are inflated by the Buckeye law of just passing through. Most Ohio tourists are merely in transit, stocking up on Stuckey's pralines and Bob Evans sausage and Marathon gas on their way to—or back from—faster times and bigger things. In an attempt to sell more pralines, sausages, and gas, the, state's tourism board recently adopted this slogan: "Ohio: The Heart of It All." That's pretty catchy, but doesn't a heart pump blood *elsewhere?* And if you're the "Heart," then isn't the "All" somewhere else?

It would be easy for a Buckeye to feel bitter, to sulk invisibly in a tent that nobody sees. On those occasions when the burden of formlessness seems too heavy, I could almost say that I'm mad as heck (to use Buckeye-speak) and I'm not gonna take it anymore. Maybe all those Ohio jokes have exacted their toll. The worst thing about them—the never-ending litany about Cleveland ("The Mistake on the Lake"), Woody Hayes, farmer savants, shoat-to-boar 4-H projects, the "Mother of Presidents," middle-class "normalcy" (Warren G. Harding's word)—is their fill-in-the-blanks quality. They have to do less with a specific place than with a general impression of incompetence and smallness. The fact that Ohio jokes actually say nothing *about* Ohio has renewed my old quest to redefine something that was never defined in the first place, to find the *quidditas* of Ohio and the core of my unsheddable identity as a Buckeye through and through.

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Lately I've been thinking that I had it right the first time, when I was lying on my belly and poring over that colorful, cryptic map, thinking of it as my whole world—or at least, my whole country. Maybe Ohio, in its stubborn indefinability, really *is* the whole country. This would offer a reasonable and honorable excuse for remaining imageless. A state could do worse than to play America in microcosm, to offer a hodgepodge so thoroughly and weirdly jumbled that its very "thereness" lies beyond recovery. Granted, we Ohioans seem bland. But can we truly *be* bland if we're the products not of nothing but of damned near everything, an entire spectrum blending into white light? And besides, who says that blandness can't be redemptive? I've wondered all my life whether a definable Ohio does or does not exist, but I'm beginning to suspect that the question, so framed, poses a false dilemma. Why can't both options be true? If Ohio's being seems to edge perilously close to nothingness, maybe its being resides *in* nothingness.

This revelation excites me. If Buckeyes are to achieve identities as crisp as those that descend upon Montanans and New Yorkers and Californians as a birthright, we're going to have to embrace the distinguishing possibilities of indistinction, to accept shapelessness as our defining shape. The beauty part, especially for a middle-aged ex-Ohioan (and the "ex-" feels tellingly natural), is that this assertion of everything-through-nothing runs true to who we really are. Ohioans are nothing if not pragmatic ("Paint your feet blue? Why would you want to do that?"), and any solution that verifies what we already know will seem right as rain, as maddeningly down-to-earth as *we* are, our faces startlingly plain in reflections from Manhattan storefronts or the waters of San Francisco Bay.

Ohio's natureless nature makes Buckeyes think of ourselves—when we think of ourselves at all—as unwritten pages, blank slates ready for anything and eternally poised to *become* something. We are, God bless us, an open people. If you grow up knowing that the City of Barbers is a suburb of the City of the High Mound of Tires, or that a drive eastward on Route 224 will take you, in fairly quick succession, through Tiffin, Attica, Willard, New Haven, Nova, Sullivan, Homerville, and Lodi, any juxtapositions that the world throws at you will not be unduly startling. You will find, in fact, that you have an innate taste for odd juxtapositions, that you are uniquely equipped to *see* them as juxtapositions in the first place. In practical terms, this means that you will possess a keen appreciation of the weird, even though—or more accurately, precisely because—the weird is alien to you. Whenever people paint their feet blue, they are surely hoping that an Ohioan will be watching them with mild surprise. They are rarely disappointed.

This, I've come to believe, is an Ohioan's mission: to serve as a counterweight to whatever is considered unusual, a foil to whatever's happening once something actually starts happening. Wherever we go, we Buck-

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eyes form a roving cultural ballast whose heraldic emblem might well be Beige Field with Nothing, Couchant. An Ohioan is a walking zero at the intersection of America's *X* and *Y* axes, a point from which everything else gains distinctiveness by veering away. Upholding this imagined, shifting center is what we were born to do.

This might seem a thankless job, but it is not without rewards. Among an Ohioan's blessings is the possibility, nowadays so rare, of being left blissfully alone. All those corny jokes about us—"Second prize, *two* weeks in Cincinnati!"—are too vague to cut very deep. Wouldn't it be worse to come from Tennessee and endure more pointed comments about moonshine, Elvis, and the Grand Ole Opry? How often do uprooted Californians hear wisecracks about earthquakes, tofu, and third-eye crystal fondlers? And what about the poor New Yorker who moves through life as everybody's tough guy, doomed to watch people constantly flinching in anticipation of the next rim-shot insult? This business of being *known* by total strangers, even through half-truths, strikes me as terrifying in its vulnerability, so public, in Dickinson's phrase, like a frog. I certainly would not like to be a frog. I'd rather be a Buckeye, gloriously swathed in my anonymity.

Emerson once remarked that to be great is to be misunderstood. A Buckeye, who defiantly offers nothing to understand, surely embodies this greatness. Ohioans are pure mystery, human ciphers capable of sinking into whatever American place we enter. Take some well-known Clevelanders—Bob Hope, Arsenio Hall, Drew Carey, Teri Garr, Hal Holbrook, Tracy Chapman, David Birney, Tim Conway, Debra Winger, Jack Weston, Paul Newman, the Eagles' Joe Walsh—and ponder their collective affect, their steady projection of generic Americanness. Cleveland and Cincinnati produced Phil Donahue, a kind of hyper-Ohioan, a Buckeye squared. Unassisted, Cincinnati gave us Roy Rogers, Steven Spielberg, and Doris Day (I wonder whether her forebears founded Dayton until I remember that her real name was von Kappelhoff). Canton gave us Jack Paar; Columbus, James Thurber and Beverly D'Angelo and Tom Poston; Toledo, Teresa Brewer and Jamie Farr. Lima, where I was born, produced Phyllis Diller. I'd like to claim Hugh Downs as my spiritual kinsman because he grew up there, but he was born in Akron.

These are my people, their inscrutable but comfortable blankness shining through even in celebrity. Even Joe Walsh, long enshrouded in a mystique of rock 'n' roll hipness, looks like a hundred guys I used to see schlepping along Cleveland's Euclid Avenue. And speaking of hipness, what about Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders and the robotic lads of Devo, Akronites all? What about Marilyn Manson, that skinny Canton boy who got tired of being Brian Warner, went Gothic, and made a mint? These folks are exceptions that prove the Buckeye rule. If they ever checked out the Akron-Canton airport during their formative years (as

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they surely did when their sunburned families returned from those Florida vacations), they learned precisely how *not* to look—how *not* to be—if you want to make it big. If you're seeking the Yin to which every self-respecting rebel must be a Yang, the Akron-Canton airport is not a bad place to start looking. And because Yin and Yang are locked in eternal embrace, Ohioans remain predictable even in dissent, the flip side of the standard-issue Buckeye. I get homesick whenever I see a picture of Chrissie Hynde. Not only was her Industrial Bad-Girl look already around when I was an Ohio teenager, but when I visit my parents for the holidays, I see dozens of her younger sisters—pasty faces, low bangs, and owl eyes—scurrying through the malls buying presents for their little brothers.

The chief lesson that Marilyn Manson and I learned at the University of Ohio is that people who are nobody can be whoever they want. We Buckeyes have that freedom, and in full measure, because we are baggageless, devoid of particular expectation. Our job, after all, has always been to watch the other people passing through. A watched person might need a special outfit—a Stetson and boots, perhaps, or maybe one of those Gloucester fisherman's caps, or a floral print shirt that renders its wearer visible as a citizen of Miami (though probably born in Columbus). But if you're one of the watchers, it matters little whether you wear Armani or Sears off the rack. Occasionally, a Buckeye will don a contrived getup—a fright wig and a husband named "Fang"? Gothic makeup? a British backup band?—and take the stage. However uncharacteristic this turning of the tables may be, a Buckeye will know exactly how to do it: all those years of *watching* are not lost on us.

When I was a kid, the Toledo *Blade* ran Earl Wilson's syndicated column, with its chatty gossip about New York showbiz and nightlife. Its running title was "An Ohioan on Broadway," a phrase that brought a rush of pride whenever I saw it. One of *us*—whoever *we* were—had somehow gotten himself to the center of things and was now soaking up the energy and feeding it back to the home folks. Whenever the smart set gathered for after-theater drinks and repartee at Toots Shor's, Earl Wilson was our stand-in, a homegrown Edward R. Murrow reporting on the action from a far hipper front than Cleveland or Cincinnati. As I grew older, though, the notion of "An Ohioan on Broadway" began to stink of self-diminishment, of an intentional dumbing down of who we were, whoever we were. Why should any of us play the star-struck yokel just to satisfy an easterner's notion of what an Ohioan was? How many New Yorkers were coming to Toledo to gaze at *us?*

Earl Wilson even looked the part: his picture revealed a nondescript man with a bovine face and a bland smile, like an Ohio insurance salesman. But now that I've turned fifty and look like an Ohio insurance

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salesman, too, I've come to see Earl Wilson as a kind of pioneer, a model Buckeye. Could there possibly be light without shadow? Broadway wouldn't exist unless somebody had the knowledge of slower, duller places. Places like Broadway *need* a steady supply of cultural and geographical centrists—solid, generic Ohioans—to crane our necks and take it all in. If life is to retain its spice, somebody has to be capable of viewing it from an undifferentiated, spiceless center. Somebody has to observe—to swell a scene or two—as a necessary foil for the observed.

It is this, finally, that makes Ohioans not only visible but indispensable. It is this that defines our niche in America's cultural geography. When a Texan leaves home, he becomes Somebody: a Texan in another place, encouraging or enduring all those faux drawls, cowboy jokes, and quips about the lucrative "erl bidness." When Ohioans leave home, however, we become Everybody: dependable, middle-of-the-road Americans bearing bread for other people's jam. It is an identity, however shapeless, that the nation cannot do without—and I am resolved to embrace it with honor and even a measure of relief. It's nice, at long last, to be somebody.

My Sohio map, of course, was telling me this all along. I should have heeded the clue embedded in those prominent words at the top: "Standard of Ohio." But I was young and green and had no way of knowing that the *real* Ohio lay in terra incognita, beyond the map's edges in those other places ("To Pittsburgh," "To Lexington," "To Indianapolis") where so many of us would live out our lives. With our special capacity for appreciating wherever we happen to end up, wherever we are *now*, we Ohioans make *your* place seem a little more interesting. Human antidotes to ennui, we expect little and are therefore pleased at most everything we find. If the first man to walk on the Moon had not been Neil Armstrong of Wapakoneta, where my favorite grape pop was bottled, the first words uttered on lunar soil might well have been, "Houston, there's nothing here." A farther-flung Earl Wilson, Neil Armstrong was only doing what comes naturally to every Buckeye. The instant his boot sank into the powdery surface and he found himself not bored, he had attained an Ohio state of mind. Ohioans, I now realize, become Ohioans only in diaspora. It is only after we have joined our fellow Buckeyes in the realm of elsewhere, a ghostly band of eager onlookers moving unobtrusively though an achingly palpable, non-Buckeye world, that we become our truest and noblest selves. After all, we got here from there.

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Bags

PAMELA ALEXANDER

Older, our bodies bigger, burdened. On every trip
souvenirs squeeze aboard: just a brooch,
coffee mug, one small painting, a bentwood
rocking chair. What's a house for? but to
swallow our money after it's changed states
from liquid to solid. Of course, we can stay here
and travel too—the rug's from someplace
we've never been. And the armoire.
                But no,
let's go; when we get back we'll hardly
recognize the place. The crates we shipped by rail
will take six weeks, but right away we dump out
big shopping bags crammed until the handles broke.
We're bad. Can't help it. Our pockets, heavy as potatoes,
rip and spill their loot. We'll buy another jacket, buy
steamer trunks, trade in the hatchback for a van—

                look,
a scarf, the shimmer of what we see. Feel it, sheer
between your fingers. Touch. The minute's for keeps.

Pamela Alexander is the author of three books of poems, the most recent of which, *Inland*, won the Iowa Prize. Winner of the Yale Younger Poet Award, she co-directs the Creative Writing Program at Oberlin College.

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The God Within

RACHEL HADAS

Metamorphosis need not denote
(these days, for me) a drastic transformation—
lover, beloved to tree or animal.
Change inheres chiefly in divinity
domesticated in a mask of flesh
(divinity must live within herself)
struggling with opacity, flickering
on and off like a family resemblance,
resisting on the one hand strangeness, on
the other too much familiarity—
too old, too new, too something in between.
A god no longer, gazing out in space,
who helps us to envision an ideal
by his effortless impersonation,
he now climbs off the pedestal of trope
and makes himself at home
in the disheveled, humble human nest
perpetually aflutter over the same old story:
epiphany/withdrawal. Love/departure.
Divinity must live within himself.
The angry father, deep-eyed, fugitive,
at once present and stubbornly absent,
leaves behind a trace of his godhead
in the person of a long-limbed, radiant son.
This is the guise in which I used to know
not a god but a demi-god, not a hero
but with some shine about him, flickering,
departing, going out and coming back
over and over: the radiant remoteness
quenched in flesh and flaring out again,
the kindness spared for what he left behind,
the shimmering reflection, the tall son.

Rachel Hadas teaches English at the Newark campus of Rutgers University and was a Fellow at the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library in 2000–2001. Her forthcoming book of poems is *Indelible*.

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Three Men and a Book

JACQUES BARZUN

The book club is not a twentieth-century invention, unless turning a thing upside down is inventiveness. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, small groups of people clubbed together to buy books because they were expensive. In colonial New York, for example, five or six men formed the New York Society Library for such a purpose in 1754, and it has had an uninterrupted existence to this day. It is now a large collection open to the public. Around the same time, the Boston Library Society thrived, and by joining another society became the present Boston Athenaeum, which combines a grand museum with a vast library and is now expanding its quarters.

The book club of the mid-twentieth century was no such grassroots affair with a noble future. It started from the business end of things, its purpose being to increase the sale of books. This need had been made acute by the practice of letting booksellers return to the publisher any unsold copies. With the enormous output of books annually and the competing agencies of film, radio, and television, the publishing industry found itself producing more than it could distribute in the ordinary way of chancy announcements through reviews. Advertising is too expensive to waste on works that do not take flight on their own. The result is that by far the greater number issued—good, bad, or indifferent—are hustled to the remainder house. Incidentally, the book jacket is a by-product of this return policy; it protects the object on its multiple comings and goings. The simple days are over when the printer-publisher sold his wares on a stall outside the press, direct to the passerby.

Jacques Barzun is a critic and historian whose contributions to the SCHOLAR span seven decades. His most recent book, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life,* published last year, became a best-seller. This essay is adapted from the preface to *A Company of Readers,* forthcoming this summer from The Free Press.

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In this country, the Literary Guild inaugurated the distribution of popular novels to people who agreed to buy every month—or nearly—a book chosen for them by the Guild. Next, the Book-of-the-Month Club offered in the same way works of a more intellectual cast, and several other organizations catered to the tastes of people interested in a single subject, such as history or popular science. In England, the Book Society was for the generalist, and the Left Book Club for Soviet sympathizers. All these enterprises succeeded in materially extending the dissemination of new books. In both countries, such success showed up the publishing industry's incapacity to sell what it made; the buyers were there, but nobody had found the means of reaching them steadily as individuals.

Book clubs achieved this purpose by offering each month a fairly wide choice of books, together with a share of the usual publishers' discount. This lowered by 25 to 30 percent the list price of books, which fifty years ago ranged from six to eight dollars. If a club member did not return the card enclosed in the bulletin by a certain date, he received the main selection automatically. Consent and absentmindedness were on a par.

Among the American clubs serving the public in this way, one had a different origin from all the rest. Instead of being the offspring of salesmanship, the Readers' Subscription was founded in September 1951 to create an audience for books that the other clubs considered to be too far above the public taste. The Book-of-the-Month Club had somewhat lowered its original goal and the specialist caterers also looked for the safely popular. The idea of going beyond these limits and supplying readers with books of solid intellectual merit arose in a conversation between Lionel Trilling and his former student in Columbia College, Gilman Kraft. He was the brother of the future political journalist Joseph Kraft, who had been a student of mine and who vouched to me for Gilman's intelligence and integrity.

Trilling and I were then teaching together a seminar for Ph.D. candidates, and when he asked me to serve with him as coeditor of the venture, I agreed. But I urged that we needed a third, not only to resolve possible differences in making the selections, but also to offset the appearance of exclusively academic judgment. I suggested a poet and proposed W. H. Auden. He and I shared a strong interest in music and used to go together to Richard Franko Goldman's classical band concerts in Central Park. Auden accepted "editing" with us, and we were off with controlled enthusiasm.

Gilman Kraft was a good organizer. He found the needed resources and used them prudently: no large staff or sumptuous offices, but two modest rooms on Broadway, a typist, and a handyman, a charming, gentle, efficient soul, who turned out to be the brother of the novelist James Baldwin. To help Kraft write the briefer notices of alternative choices and occasional recordings, we had young Leo Raditsa, later a

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distinguished scholar and teacher at St. John's College. The mailing of materials and other relations with members—the shipment of books, billing, and bookkeeping—were handled by one of the two or three firms that called themselves "fulfillment" companies, a title that soon took on the hue of irony.

The name Readers' Subscription was chosen after a long discussion in the Trillings' living room on Claremont Avenue. Gilman Kraft was present, but not Auden. It was Diana Trilling who coined the formula. I thought it inaccurate: a club member is not locked in like a magazine subscriber; he can choose a substitute for the month's offering or refuse it altogether. This disagreement was, I am happy to say, the last on any important matter. At that same session, it was Gilman Kraft who baptized the future bulletin *The Griffin*. The body of a lion and the head of an eagle is perhaps an apt description of the species Critic.

At the first editorial meeting, the three judges tackled a large pile of books that Kraft had solicited from publishers or that had been sent after the public notice of our existence. We each chose half a dozen for reading at home and briefly scanned and discussed possible others. We did this every month, or rather every four weeks, making a year of thirteen months and thirteen books. At a second meeting each month, we reported, chose the main selection and several alternates, and decided which of us would write the lead reviews. The discussions were remarkably urbane. I recall no dispute, not even unpleasant vehemence. Nor was there ever a two-to-one decision.

By good luck, we were all three incredibly punctual and faithful. It took the flu to keep one of us away, and this happened only a few times in the 139 months of our service. Wystan Auden, who may have begun with a little apprehension about trading literary opinions with a pair of professors, soon saw that Lionel and I had long forgotten our Ph.D.'s and were at ease with each other—as shortly were the three of us.

This good understanding was desirable, because each review was mailed by its author to the other two and changes or additions freely suggested by phone. Sometimes the book that one of us particularly favored had to be postponed one month to make room for another; timing was governed by the need to offer a book as soon as possible after publication. On occasion, we were outbid by the Book-of-the-Month Club, where Clifton Fadiman, that highly qualified judge, evidently shared our estimate of a new work and persuaded the rest of his panel.

It goes without saying that the tone and twists of blurbery were automatically avoided. The reviews were indeed always favorable; the book would not have been chosen if it had not pleased us all. As to our range, it had no preshrunk limits about viewpoint or subject. We offered E. M. Forster's essays on politics and society and the plays of Bertolt Brecht, the poems of Cavafy and Proust's first novel, *Jean Santeuil*. *The Griffin* might in

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addition feature a letter from an author, or a poem, or a guest reviewer for a second book. Among these visitors I recall Peter Gay, Alan Pryce-Jones, and Edmund Wilson. Forster dropped us a line when working on the libretto of *Billy Budd.* First and last, we recommended works by authors as far apart in opinion as Günter Grass, James Baldwin, Lawrence Durrell, Eleanor Clark, William Golding, Norman O. Brown, Harold Rosenberg, James Agee, William Burroughs, Cesare Pavese, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Some of our authors were at the start of their renown, but to bring out Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (with its annex, *The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas,* for the first time in English) or Berlioz's dramatized music criticism, *Evenings with the Orchestra,* was tantamount to offering our readers unknown "first works." It was not surprising that some who enjoyed our painstaking essays (each of us had two critics always at his elbow) should suggest reprinting the best pieces. Lionel Trilling yielded to the entreaty and made from among his reviews the now well known *A Gathering of Fugitives,* published in 1956.

But there hung over us another obligation, unexpected and, unlike the rest, a chore. That hopeful word "fulfillment," applied to the mechanics of distribution, turned out a delusion and betrayal. Fairly soon, friends, colleagues, or strangers who knew us through our writings sent us pathetic or indignant letters about their running battle with Fulfillment. They had received no book or the wrong book or the main book when they had declined it; they had been billed for it or billed twice or the wrong amount—or rather, they had been unable to get these misdeeds remedied after repeated letters and phone calls. We the editors were the court of last resort and we had to reply, expressing regrets coupled with promises we hardly believed in. We switched firms, but errors continued to bedevil us.

The Readers' Subscription succeeded beyond the editors' expectations—we had been a trio of cultural skeptics. But after eight years the club did not meet Gilman Kraft's financial hopes or needs, and one day in early 1959 he told us that he had reluctantly decided to leave for greener pastures. He gave us time to find his replacement. For his new venture he bought *Playbill,* made it profitable, and enlarged it while improving its literary quality. We missed him. He was always calm, friendly, and solicitous about our wants. He never offered an opinion on books unless we asked him for one, for he was a thoughtful person whose Columbia College education had given him a solid grounding in literature and history.

Remembering those book-centered discussions tempts me to suggest the atmosphere in which they took place. We enjoyed ourselves. We expressed our preferences, our prejudices freely, often turning them into

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sources of entertainment. No tricks of thought or manner were frequent enough to annoy, even though we were strongly marked characters, forced to meet face-to-face every two weeks and settle points of style and literary judgment by phone in between. Our work was, in fact, a long conversation heading toward endless decisions. But unlike the Supreme Court's sober weighing of wire-drawn arguments, our discussions were interwoven with jokes, puns, and parodies. We behaved like friends talking over what to recommend to other friends.

To make a point about something—I no longer remember what—Lionel invented "A History of English Literature from B. O. Wulf to Virginia Woolf" and parodied the textbook style. Wystan would utter a clerihew he thought apposite, and he and I got into the habit of matching clerihews by way of touching off the proceedings. For those who do not know what a clerihew is, here are one of his and one of mine: "Joseph Haydn / Never read Dryden, / Nor did Dryden / Ever hear Haydn." "Henry James / Did not name names, / But all the Bostonians knew / Who was who." Later, Auden published two collections of these ink-spot biographies. About one element of our work we all groaned in unison: the galleys. In those days, books were circulated before publication in unpaged proofs on sheets nearly two feet long and unbound. Turning over these streamers, carrying them folded in half in a duffel bag (a briefcase would not hold six or eight sets), and marking one's place or trying to find an earlier passage were as irritating as locating the set wanted, since when one had read halfway through, it bore no mark on its back.

As critics we had one trait in common: none of us applied a theory or system. Apart from this unifying mode, our tendencies and backgrounds differed widely, surely a desirable diversity for the purposes of the club. Trilling has latterly been dubbed a disciple of Matthew Arnold because he wrote a classic work on the subject, but it is a misjudgment. In youth Lionel had been a Marxist, later he was a good Freudian, and although something of these influences remained visible in his work, he was nobody's follower; his original thought outweighs the derived elements, as is true of every genuine thinker. What is more to the point than influence, he knew no foreign languages, but drew all his critical principles from absorption in English and American literature, including the great critics.

This happy single-mindedness set him apart from his two colleagues. Auden, partly because of his pride in ancestry, which his given name Wystan signalized, felt deep interest in things Germanic. He and I had had a classical education strongly colored by Greek and Latin, but he rejoiced that Oxford had compelled him to learn Anglo-Saxon. During his years with the club he was reading the Icelandic Eddas and detailing their merits to us. After many summers spent in Italy, he came to prefer

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life near Vienna, and he died there. His intellectual rapport with Hannah Arendt confirmed this sympathy with Germanic culture, as did his coolness toward French literature and ideas. For some reason he hated Racine almost as much as he hated the works of A. A. Milne.

That Wystan and I were good friends was no doubt a tribute to my Americanization. My antecedents contrasted with those of my fellow reviewers. The intellectual imprint of a French lycée should have made me a disciple of Descartes and a devotee of seventeenth-century literature, but early in life music had been an antidote and made me value the Romanticists in art and letters—this in the teeth of contemporary opinion, both French and American. Since I had grown up among the artists of the next wave, the Cubists and their peers, I was resistant to the anti-Romantic prejudice. My masters in criticism were Gautier, Hazlitt, and Poe, Goethe and Nietzsche. Trilling being untouched by them, and Auden disdainful of things French, our reviews in *The Griffin* were in an effortless way independent.

What emerges from this sketch of our inclinations is the principle of what Trilling was the first to call "cultural criticism," that is, criticism inspired by whatever is relevant to the work. Its genesis, form, and meaning have roots in the culture where it appears, and it is also unique through its author's own uniqueness. To us, none of this was new. We were cultural critics with no need of a doctrine, for the essence of culture is inclusiveness. And here Matthew Arnold properly enters again. It was he who said: "The men of culture are the true apostles of equality. They have a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best ideas of their time."

It is clear in retrospect that not we alone but the midcentury as a whole, particularly in the United States, made a many-sided effort to carry out the Arnoldian mandate. The hope of a collective enjoyment of the best in thought and art was still strong. It was manifest in the drive to send the young to college, in the foundations for the advancement of one or another cultural good and the free public libraries, in the many series of classics in cheap, well-edited form, and not least, in the book clubs.

Ours continued without a break after Gilman left us. Trilling found a successor in Sol Stein, another former student. He was Kraft's opposite in temper—buoyant, expansive, and as a budding novelist, consciously literary. He had found a sponsor for buying the Readers' Subscription, the well-to-do Arnold Bernhard. Soon we were in more spacious offices emphatically on the East Side, served by a larger staff, including the elegant and businesslike Patricia Day, who later formed with our executive the publishing firm of Stein and Day.

Aware, perhaps, of the pressure of the times, we chose as the name of our second club the Mid-Century. It was that of the monthly bulletin as

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well. The kind of books we chose and the way we presented them remained the same, but nearly everything else about the society was different. I have mentioned Sol Stein's princely ways and the classier offices. The atmosphere changed with them. For one thing, Stein took part in our discussions, which lengthened them to little perceptible advantage, because he introduced considerations of pricing and of favors to and from publishers—elements we had known nothing about before and from which we firmly remained aloof.

We were happy to have, in replacement of Leo Raditsa, a recent Harvard Ph.D., John Simon. He was a broadly educated young man with whom it was a pleasure to work. His career since then as a leading critic of theater, film, music, and language confirms the judgment that brought him into our midst forty years ago and made him so congenial a helper.

In this new incarnation of our purpose, I remember fewer appeals from distraught readers angry about bills. Fulfillment had gained somewhat in its Manichaean battle with Frustration. But not long after the changeover, a worse preoccupation began to cloud our work. It started with a suggestion from Sol Stein that the editors should become part owners of the society, on what terms was not clear. My fellow editors expressed interest, coupled with a vague alarm, which I shared. I was reluctant, both because I thought a financial interest inappropriate to our role as judges and because I foresaw additional time being used up for present negotiations and future business meetings.

They began right away and proved a kind of commitment. We were soon spending afternoons in parleyings. Then came what we had all half-detected: the society was in financial trouble. Overhead and costs exceeded revenue. When the truth was out, we became well acquainted with our backer, whose emergency help Sol Stein was soliciting. Arnold Bernhard was the founder and head of ValueLine, the highly regarded and profitable financial newsletter. Mr. Bernhard was a cultivated gentleman, whose intentions in entering our small domain were entirely altruistic. His interest was in literature and, as head trustee of the University of Bridgeport, in the spread of general education. He straightened out our current troubles and was further intent on making the editors part owners at no cost to them.

But Mr. Bernhard made one mistake, as he was the first to say when the collapse occurred. His rescue of the company had given him in double measure the right to oversee its operations and he thought of delegating the task to one of his aides at ValueLine. But he deferred to Stein's assurances and forbore, leaving the ship to its fate. After a lapse of twenty years, in November 1985, just before his death, Arnold Bernhard and I met at lunch, and soon our conversation turned to the old subject. Without any word from me, he mentioned his deep regret that he had not set a watch on the Mid-Century.

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The end of the club in 1963 was not a decline and fall. The membership had risen from about thirty-five thousand to a little over forty thousand. This formidable surge was attributed to advertising. Arnold Bernhard believed that with the company's proper handling and publicity this number could be at least doubled. The Readers' Subscription had used only mailings. Now readers of the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Herald-Tribune Books* could see the three editors in arranged poses that showed the intensity of their conferrings; journalistic realism was at work in our behalf. We also appeared on television on David Susskind's program, *Open End,* meaning that once we started talking, nothing could stop us. We forgathered one evening about eleven o'clock, and after a vague briefing went on the airwaves, seated on camp chairs and divided by a table on which were several pots and mugs. Lionel and I had coffee pots, Wystan one for tea, but the brownish liquid that flowed from his was whiskey.

Our host, Mr. Susskind, had collected a good many reviews of our published works and arranged them, folded, in three little piles. He took up one at a time, glanced at it, and with a rising inflection quoted a sentence or two. Thus goaded we were presumably to start a discussion, but after two or three such prods from the little piles (our host looked as if he were playing solitaire) nothing really got going. We had to jerry-build a conversation, unavoidably leaving him out. His voice, though, cut in at short intervals with commercials. One of them touted a brokerage firm: "I tell you, these people are integrity-ridden." Some of our listeners, half-asleep, took this encomium to be about us. Kenneth Tynan reviewed our session adversely, and quite right he was. We had tried hard to be serious and had been defeated. Trilling, in his later review of Tynan's *Curtains,* rose to our defense, claiming jocularly that Tynan "deals with [our] performance with no comprehension of its genre: he takes it to have been a problem drama, when actually it was wild, grim comedy."

That second half-life, I hasten to add, was not wholly spoiled by money matters and legal confabs. Besides the reading-and-choosing, which continued to spark good conversation, there were Wystan's birthday parties. These were held on February 21 at his apartment on St. Mark's Place. The house was a fine old specimen, *really* old. The floors curved downward, and when his thirty or forty guests stood on them, glass in hand, anyone who walked could test the degree of flexibility underfoot.

Wystan's invitations were formal, typed and multigraphed, and they bore in the lower left corner: "Carriages at eleven." About that hour on one of these occasions, the Mid-Century gang went in a body to the back room where the overcoats were piled on a couch. It was a freezing cold night and powdery snow was falling. Arnold Bernhard could not find his coat. We helped him to search again: it was gone. Arnold made no comment, thanked Wystan without mentioning the loss, and walked out with

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us as if all parties ended this way. Fortunately, several of us had mufflers; we wrapped them around his throat and torso, and he suffered no harm. A couple of days later a muffler arrived in the mail.

The end came suddenly, by telephone and without details. The new deficit was greater than Arnold Bernhard cared to make up. When the three of us met again for mutual solace, we agreed that there would have come a time, not indefinitely far off, when we would have wanted to cease and desist. And any successors of ours would have made something different of the society, perhaps more popular but not so ecumenical. The title Readers' Subscription had in fact been acquired for a club still in being today.

The close of ours, although abrupt, should not be called premature. In our eleven years and six months of existence, we had made a point about books and readers, publishers and their methods. For my part certainly, I was glad to be free of the burden of reading, meeting, and writing; but at the time I had a special cause of annoyance: my ultimate review, for February 1963, got lost in the breakup of the office. Wystan had sent it in after phoning me to say that he particularly liked it because of the parallels in it. The book was Henry Miller's autobiographical *Tropic of Cancer,* which I had compared with *Werther* for its hero and with Henry James's *Ambassadors* for its setting, which is Paris. The terms of these comparisons, like the loss, I have magnanimously forgotten.

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The Great Dissident Cuban Poet Dies in Exile at Auburn University

VIRGIL SUÁREZ

in memory of Heberto Padilla

What was it about the oak shadows cast against the walls
of your apartment that afternoon? Their playfulness?

Cats on the banister, tails hooked like question marks
in the rays of light. What memories did you see projected

behind your eyelids when you closed your eyes? Pinar
del Rio. A running brook where you first sank your feet

in muddy water. If the body is a vessel, where has it taken
you? In your mouth, a flock of black words sought refuge:

"Exile," "strife," "broken," "spirit," cousins all of your struggle.
You are a hero in your own garden now. Listen, the zun zun

buzzes a song in the ear of the hibiscus plant. It knows twelve
words for nectar, for the way a flower opens and dies. *Aqui*

no te conocen. Who knows you here? Your name? The gift
of your bitter tongue? In the island of your birth the rooster

doesn't crow now. The palm fronds remain very still in windless
skies, a surrender so deep and solemn even the waves calm

themselves in memory of your return, of your gentle, quiet passing.

Virgil Suárez, who was born in Cuba, is a professor of creative writing at Florida State University. He is the author of two forthcoming collections of poems, *Palm Crows* (University of Arizona Press) and *Banyan* (Louisiana State University Press).

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Van

BRIAN DOYLE

Tell me the facts real straight
Don't make me older
—"One Irish Rover"

There was a boy named George Ivan Morrison. He was born in summer. He was an only child. His father was quiet and his mother was exuberant. The big river nearby was the Lagan and the little river was the Beechie. He could hear the moans of ships in the big river from his bedroom in the back of the house. When he was a boy, he would walk all day long, out of the city and into the wooded Castlereagh hills, returning at night to meet his friends at the end of the street by the huge electrical towers, the pylons, where they would sing all sorts of songs together: Ray Charles, Sonny Terry, Muddy Waters, Joyce White, Hank Williams, Leadbelly, the Carter family, Roosevelt Sykes, Johnny Kidd and the Pirates, Cliff Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, the Shadows, Dixie Darling, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Jimmie Rogers.

Meet me down by the pylons, they would say, *by the pylons.*

Every street was the same in his section of Belfast, long and straight and lined with brick-faced houses each joined to each. There were several churches on Hyndford Street, where his family lived, and he could hear the silver shivering of bells day and night. There were very few trees. But Cyprus Avenue and Raglan Road were thick with oaks, and he liked to walk there and imagine that he was in the ancient forests of Ulster when

Brian Doyle is the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland. He is the author of two essay collections: *Credo* and (with his father, Jim Doyle) *Two Voices.* "The Soul of Plutarchos" (Summer 2000) was the co-winner of the American Scholar Award for Best Essay of 2000.

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Conchobor was king, or Fergus mac Roich, or when the sons of Uisliu were chanting their songs, songs so sweet that every beast that heard them gave two-thirds more milk, and every person was instantly filled with peace and joy.

When the boy was three years old, he experienced rapture while sitting before a gramophone listening to the American gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. When he was eleven years old he experienced rapture while walking along Cyprus Avenue. His father bought him a guitar and he learned the chords from a songbook of American country songs. He formed a neighborhood band called Midnight Special, which featured a boy playing a lead pipe that he had found in the Beechie River, and then he formed a neighborhood band called the Sputniks, which included a washboard player and a boy who played a broom handle attached to a tea chest. They played in movie theaters to audiences of other children. Some of the children watching the Sputniks while waiting for the second feature to begin were six or seven years old, and who knows what they thought of the guitar player, the odd wee boy from Hyndford Street, *shy as a field hare,* as one of his teachers said?

He learned to play the saxophone in three weeks and joined the Aces, who were also the Jokers or the Jacks or the Four Jacks or the Thunderbirds, depending on where they were playing that day. The Aces carried their instruments with them on the bus to get to the Working Men's Club or the Harriers Hall or the Brickborough Hall or the Hut on Chamberlain Street. Then the wee shy boy played with the Javelins, who were Deanie Sands and the Javelins when Deanie Sands sang with them, Deanie Sands being a girl named Evelyn who had had polio and wore braces on her legs and had a great voice. Then he played with the Monarchs, during which time he met a singer named Georgie Fame who was managed by the same guy who managed the Temperance Seven, and then he played with the Manhattan Showband, and then with the Golden Eagles, and then with the Gamblers.

When the Gamblers got a regular booking at a sailors' flophouse that had once been a police station, they changed their name to Them, after a 1954 horror movie in which giant ants invade California. Them started playing howling blues and jump jazz, and by now the odd wee boy was seventeen years old and locally famous for a jazzy voice bigger than he was and also for sprinting back and forth along the stage, rolling on the floor, playing the sax while sitting on a bandmate's shoulders, flinging his shirt into the crowd, and dancing with such frenetic abandon that as often as not he split his trousers.

Within three weeks of their first show at the Maritime Hotel in Belfast, people were waiting for hours to get in to see Them, and soon They signed a record contract, and then They got famous, and then They left Ireland for England and America, and although pretty soon thereafter, as

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time in rock music is accounted, Them had pissed away in contractual squabbles, their lead singer with the big jazzy voice kept on going, first headlong away from Hyndford Street and then, much later, desperately back—*take me back,* he would sing with a vast craving in his voice, *by the pylons, by the pylons. . . .*

Some three decades later, Van Morrison is on stage in a London club called Ronnie Scott's. Been a long road—thirty records made, some three hundred songs composed, a brief marriage, and a lovely daughter, Shana, who now sings with him occasionally, as she has a big bluesy voice even though she's a wee slip of a thing. He's had dozens of bands behind him as he strove for the right mix of instrumentalists to help him make the music soar into rapture. That's all he wants, all he ever wanted, he has said many times exasperatedly and grouchily to reporters. "But rock and roll is not set up that way," he has also said. "It's set up to do the opposite. It's set up to stimulate. And the music depends on a lot of factors. That's why I don't really like talking about it. It could depend on whether it rained that day or not. It depends on the chemistry of the moment, who you're playing with, whether they're in tune with the song, or the lyrics, the rhythm. It's all kinds of things. It's meant to be a meditative experience."

And now Van leans over to Georgie Fame, who plays organ and arranges horn charts for him, and he mutters, loud enough for the rest of the band to hear, *gee em,* which means the key of G major, which means that they all might slide into "It's All in the Game," which, after Van noodles for a moment on his guitar, they do.

The band knows at least sixty songs and has a rough idea of what might be played tonight, based on what they've been playing recently, but only Van knows which one is next. "We have a set list," says Guy Barker, the trombone player, "but it only lasts as long as two or three songs. Then Van yells at Georgie, who has an extra mike fixed up to communicate with him, and Georgie passes the message along to us. We improvise about sixty percent of the time. We rarely go through a play list. Van is into another aspect of the music."

On the saxophone, Pee Wee Ellis, who used to play with James Brown, the Godfather of Soul, the Sex Machine—and who not only wields a sharp sax but also sings call and response whenever the urge seizes Van to repeat phrases or sing whatever comes into his head, an urge that comes upon him often, sometimes for ten minutes at a time. The band has learned to adjust to this and simply stretch out and play bars over and over as long as Van keeps going. Usually he gives some sort of sign when he is closing up shop—often simply a glance or nod of the head, which Irish musicians call "the billy." "Van's is a style of singing that can still be heard in remote pockets of Connemara and Donegal," says Paddy Moloney of the Chieftains. "At the end of a song he just rattles on. You

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don't know when he's going to stop, he doesn't know when he's going to stop, depends what's in him at the time." Paddy likes to tell the story of the time he asked Van to give him the billy at the end of a song, and when Van finished his scat singing he shouted *Billy! Billy!*

"It's All in the Game" is maybe the last song you might imagine a band of jazz and rhythm-and-blues musicians of this caliber to slide into. Although they are opening the tune in G major, it was composed in 1912, as the wordless "Melody in A Major," by Charles Dawes, a Chicago banker who later served as vice president of the United States under Calvin Coolidge. The simple lyrics—avuncular advice from the narrator to a brokenhearted teenage girl as she sits by a phone that refuses to ring—were composed in 1951 by Carl Sigman. The song was then recorded by Sammy Kaye, Carmen Cavallaro, Dinah Shore, and Tommy Edwards. Edwards's first recording of it, in 1957, is straight pop, and slow; his second, in 1958, speeds it up a hair. In 1964 Cliff Richard recorded the second version. In 1970 the Four Tops recorded the second version. In 1979, Van made his first album for Mercury Records, *Into the Music.* Mercury wants to issue a single. Singles come with two sides. The A side is "Cleaning Windows," a song about a job Van had at sixteen near Hyndford Street with a boy named Sammy Woodburn who climbed the ladder to the top windows because his legs were longer than Van's. The B side, to everyone's astonishment, is "All in The Game," which Van, with his voice alone (the music never goes faster than the relatively sedate beat Edwards gave it in 1958), turns into a bluesy R&B tune. So somehow, somewhere, a melody begun in an American banker's head early in the twentieth century spun into an Irish singer's head later in the twentieth century and spun out again as a piece of Van music. It's been Vanned, and it is continually Vanned; he never plays it the same way twice.

On the guitar Bernie Holland on the piano Neil Drinkwater on the bass Brian Odgers on the drums there in the back Dave Early and on the horns Richie Buckley and Steve Gregory and let's have a hand for Georgie Fame on the organ, Georgie Fame!

Having opened in G, the band enters the "head" of the song—the song proper, the stanzas and chorus—demurely backing their leader, who sings gently, affectionately, with his eyes closed, the lyrics that Carl Sigman wrote in 1951: *Once in a while he won't call / But it's all in the game, child. . . .* He might be advising his own daughter. The band behind him drifts easily through various key changes—a map of the song, in fact, resembles a DNA ladder, GCGDBEBCDAADDGCCDGCGDGCGCGCGGCGCGCGCGBC, to which Georgie Fame adds a masterly Hammond B3 organ solo (in GCGDGCGDGCGDGCGD), Van finishing the whole thing with a made-up-on-the-spot closing vocal (in GCGCGCGCGBC), the vocal including a spot of wordless scattish moaning in C—and gradually, at Van's subtle direction, speeding up to the point where the song that began in 4/4

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time finishes in something closer to 12/8, a not-uncommon blues beat, here applied to a song that began as something like a standard eight-bar blues and finished as something like a sixteen-bar blues without a second chorus and with an extra "tag," or bar's worth of music.

Or, to translate: they jammed through a phrase, played the head once through, played the bridge, quieted while Georgie took a solo (the drummer shifting from the hi-hat to the ride cymbal, and going to a "stick click," a gentle crisp sound that keeps the beat while the Hammond moans and growls), then picked it up (Van gesturing to the drummer to hit harder), rose to a crescendo, played an extra bar at that fever pitch at another signal from Van, and finished with a brassy flourish.

But the words here on the page are shadows of what has happened on the stage of Ronnie Scott's club tonight. They're tracks, footprints, marks—a tuft of fur left on a bush in passing, spoor in the snow. They don't catch Georgie's skill and pleasure in fingering an instrument with an infinite number of possible timbres, a machine that began in New York a century ago as a "teleharmonium" designed to send music through electric wires, a machine that Georgie has played for hours every day for four decades. They don't catch the way Georgie plays six quick rhythmic notes as a signal to the drummer to pick up the pace. They don't catch the drummer's instinctive decision to relax to a quiet groove (or "sit in the pocket," as drummers say) a beat before Georgie opens his solo. They don't catch the camaraderie of the bassist and the drummer, who, like all rhythm sections in all bands, drive every kind of ship through every kind of water. They don't catch the odd way Van plays the guitar with a pick on his thumb, or how he swerves off the lyrics in the second chorus and makes up his own tender advice to the girl waiting by the phone, or how at the end he again closes his eyes and throws his head back, singing *I want to lose myself I want to lose myself* as the music washes over him like water and the band builds to a crescendo. And then just before the bar ends, Van shouts *make it real one more time,* and the band plays one more rousing chorus before he lifts his guitar to signal the flourish.

And with a howling of horns, the song ends.

As the packed house begins to roar, Van turns away and nods to Georgie, who grins, and then Van half-bends, half-kneels to pick up something from the stage—a glass of porter, it turns out, which he sips from and then places gently on a speaker—but the half-kneeling as he goes for the glass looks like nothing so much as a genuflection.

There was a boy named Setanta Sualdaim mac Roich. He was an only child. He was born somewhere west of Belfast and north of the River Boyne. His mother was Deichtine, the sister of Conchobor, the king of Ulster, and his father was Sualdam mac Roich, although some say that his father was really Lug mac Ethnenn, a prince of the dine, the hidden people.

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He was reared in a house of oak on a plain. When he was seven years old, a ferocious hound attacked him and he killed it. To pay for its death, he vowed to protect the owner's herds of sheep and cattle himself, and so he earned a new name: Cú Chulainn, the Hound of Chulainn.

There are many stories and songs about the Hound—that he was so fast he could seize a stag in full flight, and catch the shot from his own sling before it hit the earth; that he was so hardy he slept on two great blocks of stone; that he could go sleepless from the last day of summer until the first day of spring; that he woke so furiously that no one dared rouse him; that he could carry twice his own weight on his back; that he could stand on a spear-point without bloodying his feet; that, like a great salmon, he could leap twenty times his own height; that he could juggle nine apples with never more than one in his palm; that he could keep a golden apple in the air with his breath alone; and that he could step on a lance in flight and straighten it and then balance atop the point.

His hair was brown at the roots and red in the middle and blond at the ends. He wore it in three thick coils that fell past his shoulders, and into his hair were tied a hundred red threads. Crimson was his color, and so his layered-leather shield and tunic and shirt were dark red. He wore a concealing cloak that made him a shadow to his enemies. The cloak was made of cloth from Tir Tairngire, the Land of Promise, and given to him by his fairy-father, Lug mac Ethnenn, who had the magic of the hidden people.

When Cú Chulainn was seventeen years old, he held off the armies of Connacht, which were invading Ulster, by first harrying them from the hills with his sling, killing a hundred men, and then by battling them in river fords, first one by one and then in groups of seven and nine, killing a thousand. Finally his beloved foster brother Ferdia mac Damain meic Dairi came to fight him at a ford near Fuiliarnn. They fought for three days, every night sending each other food and sweet herbs as medicines for the wounds they had made in each other during the day. They fought so bitterly that the river itself fled its bed in terror to give them room for their warfare.

At the end of the third day Ferdia fell into Cú Chulainn's arms, and the Hound dragged him to the north side of the river so that he would die in Ulster, and there by the river Cú Chulainn mourned and lamented for a long time. Cú Chulainn was himself so pierced and wounded by his many battles that not one inch of his body was unscarred. Presently he fell into a trance, and his healing was so long that he appears but once in all the rest of the Tain Bo Cuailnge, the old tales of the people of the north of Ireland. There are stories of him later, though, among them the account of his final battle, when he held his enemies at bay for three days by tying himself to a stone, so they would see him erect and with sword in hand, even as his wounds were such that he filled a lake with his blood,

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which was drunk by an otter. His reason and his vision began to desert him, and he dreamed dark dreams; but there was a deep spring of valor in him, and his unfathomable spirit sustained him, even in his darkest hour, and he remained invincible until his last breath.

Cú Chulainn had two beloved foster brothers, men he loved and revered, Ferdia mac Damain and Fergus mac Roich, and he had a wife, Emer of the Gardens of Lug, whom he loved until the day of his death; but his best friend was his constant companion, Laeg mac Riangabra, who drove his chariot and arranged his weapons. It was Laeg who helped him into his battle-armor, and counseled him, and ministered to his wounds, and encouraged him in war, and mourned with him. And when the deepest sadness was upon Cú Chulainn, and it seemed as if he would allow himself to die of despair on the bloody riverbank by the waters of Fuiliarnn, it was Laeg who listened, Laeg who understood, Laeg whose friendship brought him back from the land of despair to the land of wordless joy.

Georgie's tour opened in a little English village called Leigh, between the rivers Dee and Ribble, where he was born in 1943 and christened Clive Powell. At age sixteen he was working in a local mill like any sensible Lancashire boy. Then his family went vacationing in Wales, and the keyboard player for a local rock band got sick, and young Clive filled in for him, and he was so good that he was asked to join the band, which he did. But soon after that, in the entropic way of rock bands, the group disbanded, and Clive, in the way of footloose English boys for a thousand years, washed downstream to London. He ended up playing organ in a bar in the East End, where a man named Lionel Bart heard him and suggested he audition for a rock impresario named Larry Parnes. Parnes was impressed with Clive's talent but not with his name, so he signed and rechristened the lad at the same time.

Larry Parnes's biggest star in 1961 was a singer named Billy Fury, who was backed by a band called the Blue Flames, who may have modeled their name and game on James Brown's band, the Famous Flames. The Blue Flames invited the kid from Leigh to join them on the Hammond B3 organ. A few months later, Billy Fury fired the Blue Flames, but by then the kid on the organ was the talk of London, and Georgie and the Blue Flames got a regular gig playing ska at the Flamingo Club. Their nights there were soon such hot stuff that Georgie and the Blue Flames cut a record—*Live at the Flamingo!*—and started touring to promote it, which tours (one with the rock legend Eddie Cochran, who died suddenly during the tour) brought them to Belfast. There, at about the time that Georgie made the newspapers for demanding that he and the Flames be given an unheard-of *two whole hours* for their show at a local ballroom, the boy from Hyndford Street was causing a ruckus four times

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a night, seven nights a week, at the Maritime Hotel. At this point, Georgie was twenty-one and Van was all of nineteen.

In November of 1964, the British music magazine *New Musical Express* released its pop charts. At number 1, the most popular song in the United Kingdom, "Yeh Yeh" by Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames. At number 23 and rising fast, a tune originally written by the American blues singer Big Joe Williams, "Baby Please Don't Go," by the Irish group Them, featuring Van Morrison.

For two more years Georgie and the Blue Flames were perhaps the most popular and renowned band in England, and aspiring musicians—among them drummer Mitch Mitchell, who would later play with Jimi Hendrix—vied to be the next Clive Powell, the teenage sensation immediately invited into the band. But in 1966, Georgie disbanded the Flames and began a twenty-year period in the musical desert, a time highlighted by occasional rapture (touring Europe with the Count Basie Orchestra) but far more than occasional dreck: television shows, cabaret productions, and uninspired recordings (among them, God help us all, "The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde"). Finally Georgie was reduced to composing jingles for Esso commercials.

Then, one day in the late 1980s, Georgie's phone rang. It was his son, a studio engineer who had just finished working a recording session with Van. Georgie's son, let us say, remarked to his father that he had just spoken briefly with Van Morrison, who lit up at the news that Georgie Fame was the engineer's father; and Van, let us say, told stories of catching Georgie and the Flames at the Flamingo, and of a roaring drunk together once through the East End that finished with two Flames and three Them in the drunk tank and him and Georgie singing like larks at Nelson's pillar, which surely set the Admiral spinning in his grave, eh, and how is your da these days, then? He was the greatest man behind the Hammond organ in all the world, you know, here's my phone number, have him give me a jingle, will you? Georgie Fame, he was a fecking genius . . .

And later that day, let us say, after drinks and before dinner, Georgie fingered the scrap of paper and figured *ah what the hell* and called, and a dark suspicious growl answered, and Georgie said yeh, Van, listen, this is Georgie Fame, and the suspicion at the other end dropped like a stone. And in this manner Georgie and Van renewed the sinew of their friendship, laid aside in the days of their youthful abandon, and swore it anew as comrades in arms in the maturity of their years and the fullness of their powers, and fared forth together, Georgie restored from jingles for Esso and Van restored to performing live on stage, which act he had for seven years with malice abandoned, considering it foul fare for George Ivan mac Morrison, born between the Lagan and the Beechie. So by Fame he was reborn to joy.

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On September 25, 1967, at 7:00 P.M., at a studio called Century Sound in the theater district of New York City, a group of jazz musicians gathered. They were session men, hired to play until midnight. On drums, Connie Kay, whose regular group was the Modern Jazz Quartet. On the vibraphone, Warren Smith. On bass, Richard Davis, who had played with Miles Davis. On guitar, Jay Berliner, who had played with Charles Mingus. On flute, John Payne, who had just dropped out of Harvard. The singer, and leader, was the boy from Hyndford Street, who had just turned twenty-two, married an American who called herself Janet Planet, and moved to Boston.

"We were used to playing to charts," remembered Berliner, "but Van just played us the songs on his guitar and then told us to go ahead and play exactly what we felt." Payne remembered that Van "seemed spaced out, he appeared as if he was in a lot of personal pain." There were no rehearsals. When Van finished sketching the four songs he wanted to record that night, the musicians simply began. "These guys just jammed together," remembered another musician there that night, a bassist named John Kielbania, who had played with Van in Boston and came to the session hoping to sit in. "They went right through those songs and then cut all the solos out." (He was talking about the later editing process, during which harpsichord and strings were added.) "If they hadn't done that, every track would have been the whole side of an album."

Berliner didn't arrive at the studio until 9:00 P.M., so the first two songs recorded, "Cyprus Avenue" and "Madame George," featured Van on guitar. Berliner played on the third, "Beside You," and Payne played his flute on the last, "Astral Weeks," which was recorded on its first and only take. "Van never discussed the song," recalled Payne. "He never said anything."

Three weeks later, on October 15, the same musicians gathered again, this time at dusk, and recorded four more songs in the same odd fashion. "There's a certain feel about a seven o'clock session," says Richard Davis, the bassist. "You've just come back from dinner, some guys have had a drink or two, it's this dusky part of the day, and everybody's relaxed. I remember that the ambience of that time of the day was all through everything we played." From this session came "Sweet Thing," "Ballerina," "The Way Young Lovers Do," and "Slim Slo Slider," on which Van, who had learned the sax in order to be admitted to the Aces, finished with a sax solo that sounds, as he says, "like it's coming from across a lake."

So, in the space of about ten hours in the crisp early days of one autumn in Manhattan, came *Astral Weeks*, "still the most adventurous record made in the rock medium, and there hasn't really been a record with that amount of daring made since," says Elvis Costello, who was born Declan Patrick MacManus near the river Thames, an only child whose father was a trumpeter, whose mother ran a record shop, and who counts among his foremost musical influences one Georgie Fame.

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Even the man who made *Astral Weeks* is not altogether sure what happened. "Originally it was supposed to be an opera," says Van. "By opera I mean multiple visual sketches. I thought I'd do an album that was just singing, and songs that were about something." He can trace some footprints—Cyprus Avenue is the street in Belfast where he experienced rapture under the trees, Madame George was first Madame Joy, named for a clairvoyant aunt in Belfast—but in the end, Van is honest enough to say that he cannot explain the music he makes and does not wish to try: a theme he has sounded for nearly four decades in nearly every one of the hundreds of interviews he has been forced to endure. "There's really nothing to talk about when you discuss it," he says. "It's just what I wanted to do at that particular time, so I did it."

The first time I laid eyes on Van Morrison—or, more properly, on his filmed image—was in a smoky bar in Boston on a night when a movie was being shown on a large white wall in the rear. This was the first of a short-lived series of free movies shown by the proprietors in an informal setting. Turned out there were several problems with the venue: the grainy plaster of the wall made it appear that human figures in the movie had skins like lizards; every time a patron stood up, his or her shadow entered the movie; and there was a constant parade of shadows passing through, because the bathrooms were in the rear of the bar, and nature was yelping every two minutes, and so were the other patrons when someone moved through the movie on the way to the rear of the bar.

The movie that night was Martin Scorsese's *Last Waltz*, a documentary of the last public concert, on Thanksgiving Day in 1976, by the original members of The Band (Robbie Robertson, Rick Danko, Garth Hudson, Richard Manuel, Levon Helm), with various friends and guests (Joni Mitchell, Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Doctor John, Muddy Waters). And after one guest artist left to applause, The Band was still rocking along as the next artist prepared to enter stage right and crowd noise in the movie swelled. *Ladies and Gentlemen, Mister! Van! Morrison!* shouted the master of ceremonies at the Winterland Theater in San Francisco. I leaned forward in my sticky seat in the bar in Boston to see what creature made the incredible sound that had been riveting me for years . . . and out swaggered a stout little man in an unfortunate sequined cranberry leisure suit with a lace-up crotch, his double chin crowding the wide wings of his collar, most of his hair past tense, what remained sailing off east and west in wings nearly as wide as the collar. I stared openmouthed: *Van is a little fat guy!* and then the band smoothed out and he opened his mouth and out came that Voice slicing through the smoke and beery clatter like a rhythm-and-blues blade.

"We could hardly believe that the short, pudgy replica of the gray nerd who sat behind you through a whole semester of Driver Education and

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never spoke a word, that absolute antithesis of every Superstar image ever stamped in our skulls, could be the helmsman of this wild night's ride," wrote the rock critic Lester Bangs. I read that remark years later and yawped with delighted surprise, for that had been the exact feeling I'd had in the smoky bar in Boston, sitting there with my jaw hanging open as Van strutted exuberantly offstage after an incendiary version of "Caravan." Van Morrison, a musical genius, the greatest white soul singer ever, creator of music and emotion unlike any musician before or since, is *that guy?*

Substance and illusion, that's the lesson. Packaging is a fool, a lie, a dog that don't hunt, a pile of manure, a sneer in the ear, a dodge, a maneuver, a sleight of hand, a baloney sandwich. There's substance on this side of the river and illusion on that side and they are brothers who fight so bitterly that the river where they battle flees its bed in terror as the brothers who love each other hammer each other nigh unto death. Substance wears a concealing cloak that makes him a shadow, a cloak from the land of promise.

From July 1986, when Mercury Records released *No Guru, No Method, No Teacher,* to September 1991, when Polydor Records released *Hymns to the Silence,* Van Morrison produced six albums, each superb—among the greatest sustained bursts of musical creativity in the twentieth century. After *No Guru* came *Poetic Champions Compose* (1987), *Irish Heartbeat* (1988, with the Chieftains), *Avalon Sunset* (1989), *Enlightenment* (1990), and *Hymns to the Silence* (1991). "Why is it," asked Bruce Springsteen in 1990, "that Van Morrison releases a record of genius every year, and no one notices? Why is that?"

No Guru opens with a song called "Got to Go Back," about his childhood. *Poetic Champions* has a song called "Give Me My Rapture," about his childhood. *Irish Heartbeat* has a song called "Carrickfergus," about a town just north of Belfast (where Jonathan Swift lived and William of Orange landed). *Avalon Sunset* has a song called "Orangefield," about his grade school. *Enlightenment* has a song called "In the Days Before Rock 'n Roll," about his childhood. *Hymns to the Silence* has a song called "Take Me Back," in which he sings "Take me way back, when everything made more sense, when you walked down an avenue of trees on a golden summer day, when I understood the light,

When you lived, when you lived
When you lived, in the light
When you lived in the grace
In the grace, in grace
When you lived in the light
In the light, in the grace
And the blessing.

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Near the end of *Hymns to the Silence* there is a song called "On Hyndford Street." Van doesn't sing this, exactly; he intones it, or chants it, or muses rhythmically aloud, over gentle, humming, droning music, and it has a hypnotic quality to it, as if he is trying to pray or sing or chant himself back into his bedroom near the Beechie River:

Take me back, take me way, way, way back
On Hyndford Street
Where you could feel the silence at half past eleven
On long summer nights
As the wireless played Radio Luxembourg
And the voices whispered across Beechie River
And walks up Cherry Valley
On sunny summer afternoons
Picking apples from the side of the tracks
That spilled over from the gardens on Cyprus Avenue
Watching the moth catcher working the floodlights in the evenings
And meeting down by the pylons
Playing round Mrs. Kelly's lamp
Going out to Holywood on the bus
And walking from the end of the lines to the seaside
Stopping at Fusco's for ice cream
In the days before rock 'n roll
Hyndford Street, Abetta Parade
Orangefield, St. Donard's Church
Sunday six bells, and in between the silence there was conversation
And laughter, and music and singing, and shivers up the back of the neck
And tuning in to Luxembourg late at night
And jazz and blues records during the day
Also Debussy on the third programme
Early mornings when contemplation was best
Going up the Castlereagh hills
And the Cregagh glens in summer and coming back
To Hyndford Street, feeling wondrous and lit up inside
With a sense of everlasting life
And reading Mr. Jelly Roll and Big Bill Broonzy
And *Really the Blues* by Mezz Mezzrow
And *Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac
Over and over again
And voices echoing late at night over Beechie River
And it's always being now, and it's always being now
It's always now
On Hyndford Street where you could feel the silence
At half past eleven on long summer nights
As the wireless played Radio Luxembourg

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And the voices whispered across Beechie River
And in the quietness we sank into restful slumber in silence
And carried on dreaming in God.

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There are a thousand stories that swirl like dark birds about George Ivan Morrison, born in Belfast in 1945 and peripatetic since. Perhaps he is a legend largely because he does not wish to be. He appears offstage exactly one minute before he is due onstage. He leaves the theater ten minutes after the encore. He is a sucker for chocolate ice cream. He once told an interviewer that he eats nine full meals a day. He told another interviewer that he has never in forty years performed a song the same way twice. He may or may not be married to Michelle Rocca, who was once Miss Ireland. He always sits with his back against the wall. He will eat a sandwich only if the crusts are neatly deleted. He once found an interview so onerous that he ran off down the street trying to elude his questioner, who ran after him, and who later retaliated by writing that Van had "the belly of a baker and skin the color of boiled cabbage." To the author of a book about him he sent a letter listing its thirty-six mistakes. He and Paddy Moloney of the Chieftains once plotted out a whole album while walking through St. Stephen's Green in Dublin. He has received an honorary doctorate of letters from the University of Ulster. He has received an Order of the British Empire from the Queen of England. He has expressed interest in teaching philosophy at Belfast University. He is fond of leaving the stage while shouting *Soul! Soul! Soul!* He has said that "sometimes I feel like Phil Spector and sometimes I feel like Howard Hughes." He once stopped in the middle of a concert in Holland and suddenly recited the Lord's Prayer. In recent performances indoors, he has asked that the theater blaze with light. He once organized and funded a conference at which one of the sessions was titled "The Effect of Music Upon Hormonal Secretions in the Endocrine Gland." He has sung with Richard Gere and Kermit the Frog. His songs have been performed by Helen Reddy and Richard Hell. His songs have appeared in films directed by Martin Scorsese, Wim Wenders, Francis Ford Coppola, and David Lynch. "Gloria," which he wrote when he was nineteen, may be the most-performed song in rock history. He recorded a version of Cú Chulainn's saga for a cassette issued by a company called Moles of Bath. He has for some years now lived on the Salisbury Plain in England, between the Severn and Stour rivers, in what was in King Arthur's time called the Vale of Avalon. He has said that his favorite single concert, among the many thousands he has done, was for a handful of people on a winter night in the Church of Saint Stogumber in the Vale of Avalon—a free concert arranged by the local schoolteacher. Michelle Rocca, asked

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to sum up Van in a line, wrote that he was "honest, mordant, and funny." His favorite television show is *Fawlty Towers*. The Irish poet Paul Durcan has called him the greatest Irish poet since Patrick Kavanagh. A Welsh plasterer from Merthyr Tydfil now makes his living as a Van Morrison impersonator. Van's song "Days Like This" became the unofficial anthem of the Northern Irish peace process in the late 1990s, sung in bars and squares and streets and docks, echoing in Belfast, where he had long ago been the wee lad shy as a field hare.

The greatest river in North America is the Columbia. It begins high in the Canadian Rocky Mountains and drains seven American states and two time zones and a vast Canadian province before cramming itself down the throat of the Pacific Ocean. In it are the biggest freshwater fish in the world, sturgeon, which get to be as long and heavy as Cadillacs. On its way through Washington and Oregon, the Columbia cuts through a thousand miles and canyon walls a thousand feet high. It roars past farms and ranches and forests and a nuclear reactor that no longer reacts. It is dammed by fourteen dams, one of which is the largest concrete thing in the history of the world. The Grand Coulee Dam is a mile across and irrigates a million acres and has a spillway twice as high as Niagara Falls. *Mightiest thing ever built by man,* wrote Woody Guthrie of it in 1941, when he was hired to make songs about how great the dam was. He wrote twenty-six songs in a month and then took off running toward his young death, but he left those songs behind him. One is called "Roll On, Columbia," which it does, and then some.

Downriver a ways from the largest concrete thing in the history of the world is a place near the town of George where one wall of the river's gorge falls away into a huge sloping cupped hillside, a massive grass bowl tipped into the river. The bowl is big enough to seat twenty thousand people, and then some. Across the river from the bowl is a sheer basalt wall that looks and acts like an audio speaker on steroids. Some years ago, an enterprising soul built a stage in this natural amphitheater and began booking musical performers of international renown into concerts there during the summer, when the weather in central Washington State, on the high plains east of the Cascades, is clear and dry. So came the boy from Hyndford Street to George, Washington, on the north bank of the Columbia River, on a July evening near the end of the century.

There were boats in the river as night fell, more and more of them as the time for the show approached, people who saw no need to buy tickets when you could sail up and anchor behind the stage. You could hear the moans of their boat horns in the darkening air and see the flicker of the fires they lit on the sliver of beach across from the stage. The whole hillside was flickering too—the orange dots of cigarettes and joints, the silver and copper glint of eyeglasses, the yellow beams of flashlights.

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An eagle floated past, a second eagle, an arrowhead of cormorants, a heron. The heron circled and circled and circled until eventually the whole hillside noticed it and began to cheer, and then it drifted away downriver like a leggy blue plane.

At dusk the crowd began to mutter and rumble as dark figures wandered out from the wings and took their places by their instruments, but the microphone at center stage remained unattended in its pool of brilliant light. Then a limousine made its way slowly from a tent a few hundred yards away, and a small hunched figure dressed in a black suit, with a black hat and black sunglasses, jumped out and ran into the light. And, with a snap of his fingers, Van began.

He played old songs and new songs; he played songs from Them and songs by Frank Sinatra; he played an old song of his called "Brown-Eyed Girl," which he had several times sworn never to play again (in fact, he had sworn from the stage to kill himself if he ever had to play it again); he played gospel songs; he played "Take Me Back"; he played "Why Must I Always Explain?", which he sang with the strength of three men. He sang fast and furiously, no more than a few seconds between songs, and many times the songs slid one into another without boundaries, as if they were one long river of song, Van keeping the music in the air at all times with his breath alone.

During the whole show he planted himself in the center of the stage, gripping the mike with his left hand and gesturing sharply to the band with his right, the band shifting gears instantly to his signals: key change, extend the bridge, a fifth bar, double a solo. Behind him, Georgie Fame grinned and sang with abandon. When Georgie took an early solo during "All in the Game," Van fell into a trance and stood there silent, but once they were over the bridge of the song and near the crescendo, Van held the band there for a long moment, chanting *I want to lose myself I want to lose myself* and then roaring *meet me down by the pylons, by the pylons, by the pylons.* When the song ended, the crowd roared for a long time, and the sound boomed off the wall of the gorge and echoed downriver for miles and miles and miles, maybe all the way to the sea.

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The Musicians Play Basketball

TIM ADELL

There are movements
so grand you want the mover
frozen rampant—

stunned in that skin,
in the impossible soar
down on the rim.

In that sweet slam
will the backboard and we not
sense the sublime

tremors of what
it might be to live forever?
This is not that.

These musicians,
resting from their *kyrie*
eleisons,

play profanely,
cursing shots off the backboard
inside the key—

crude as Mozart,
who still soared a requiem
so sweet it's hard

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to imagine
living on when his shadow
of music's gone.

But we do, we
let our seats flop sighing up and
wish we could be

not walking home—
our moon clutched in darkness, a ball
up too high, some

errant pass we'll
never haul in. We'll never know
the rim's sweet pull,

how it feels to
float just so, stunned, fingers on iron,
slamming it through.

Damn! Lord, grace now
each graceless shooting motion.
Bless us, earthbound.

Tim Adell teaches English at Victor Valley College in California.

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Trio

CONSTANCE EGEMO

They weren't beautiful.
They weren't even sweet-tempered,
those three skinny women
with gray marcels.

Old standbys in the church,
they filled in for the choir in August
on Sunday mornings.

Always they chose anthems from the hymnal,
except for one hot Sunday
when their song began,
"Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove.
Far away, far away would I roam . . . "

How many Victorian parlors
resounded to those lines,
sung with the yearning of the truly caged?

The trio began as usual, shrill and wavering,
more an argument than harmony.
But gradually their voices softened
and blended together.

Their music gently dreamed them away,
lifted them into a second age of innocence.
A melting sweetness came into their song.

Such singing no one bargained for.
The longing in their voices, so naked,
embarrassed us.
They were old women in our eyes,
the mothers of our friends.
We cringed in our seats, blushing.

After the final chord they looked down at us,
suddenly remembering who they were.
Then they scurried away,
rigid with self-consciousness,
their closed faces disowning every note.

Constance Egemo is the author of *Dreams and Silences*. Her poems have appeared in *Yankee, Amicus, National Forum*, and other journals.

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The Case of Thomas Carlyle

Published Letters, Private Life, and the Limits of Knowledge

ROCHELLE GURSTEIN

"The feeling against telling the whole truth has reached a pitch which borders on hysteria," observed a writer in the American journal *Forum* in 1891. "Cries of 'violated confidence,' 'scandalous imputations,' 'the dishonoring of the dead,' 'the neglected sanctities of private life,' fill the air and assail every writer who, having undertaken to tell the story of a life, dares to tell it truly." But no one, the writer continued, "was assailed with half the virulence that Mr. Froude was destined to encounter. The storm against this unhappy man for the works he wrote and edited about Carlyle has not even yet spent itself."

Today, the boundary between public and private has been so casually and routinely violated that our sense of the difference between the two is on the verge of extinction. But, as the clamor against candid biography in the 1890s makes clear, this was not always so. Sustained discussion about the nature of privacy is only as old as the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the reason the subject was broached at all was that privacy—that cherished refuge for intimacy, spontaneous feeling, and self-disclosure—was under siege. Both in America and in Britain, unprecedented kinds of publicity—specifically, invasive journalism and frank biographies—gave rise to a shrill and interminable debate about privacy. And in America, the threat to individual dignity and to the tone of public discussion was thought to be so great that critics turned to the law to rein in prying journalists, resulting in right-to-privacy legislation.

Rochelle Gurstein is the author of *The Repeal of Reticence*. This essay originated as a contribution to a symposium on Roger Shattuck's *Forbidden Knowledge* at the Center for Free Inquiry at Hanover College in Indiana.

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Of the countless disputes that raged over what Henry James called "the devouring publicity of life," perhaps the most vehement, complicated, and unhappy concerns the biography of Thomas Carlyle, and the publication of his private papers, by his trusted friend and self-avowed disciple, James Froude, which incited the angry charges quoted above. At his death in 1881, Carlyle was among the most revered writers in Britain. Social critic, biographer, historian, and interpreter of German romanticism in England, he was renowned as a tireless critic of sham and hypocrisy. At the height of his influence he was called "prophet," and in his last years, "the Sage of Chelsea." George Eliot could speak of his enormous influence as early as 1855: "There is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived."

Although Carlyle repeatedly declared that his life was in his works and that his biography should never be written, he also knew that his fame had sealed his fate. As with all prominent figures of the time, a multi-volume biography was bound to appear after his death, to be followed immediately by a multi-volume edition of letters and countless reminiscences and memoirs by friends and acquaintances. So, in 1873, Carlyle anointed Froude, a prominent historian in his own right, as his biographer. Over the next ten years, Froude complied with his friend's wishes and published Carlyle's *Reminiscences* (1881), four volumes of biography (1882, 1884), and the *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (1883). Yet for all his labors, Froude, as one commentator observed in 1891, had "the proud distinction of being the most scolded man in the world."

From the moment the *Reminiscences* appeared, controversy erupted. The volume contains memoirs of Carlyle's father, of his Scottish friends from his youth, and of famous romantic poets, but at its heart is a long and painful musing about his wife, Jane, written just after her death in 1866, when Carlyle was wild with grief. That the volume appeared only two months after Carlyle's death, when the world was still mourning him, helps to explain the sudden revulsion it provoked. As one friend and admirer, M. O. W. Oliphant, put it, the *Reminiscences* "burst upon the world like a missile, an angry meteor, rather than with the still shining as of a star in the firmament we had looked for." To everyone's astonishment, Carlyle's own account of his life revealed "a far less impressive and dignified personality than that which—in the reverential myths and legends of the gods of which Carlyle in his old age has been so long the subject—his generation has attributed to him." What was actually revealed is tame by today's standards: that Carlyle was often irritable, dyspeptic, gloomy, self-absorbed, and neglectful of his wife; that Jane Carlyle suffered excruciating headaches and sleeplessness and sometimes feared for her

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sanity. But it was precisely this unveiling of family secrets, along with some caustic remarks about famous acquaintances, living and dead, that struck many of Carlyle's contemporaries as unseemly.

Matters were made worse when, in accordance with Carlyle's wishes that his niece Mary should have all his papers after Froude had made use of them, Froude returned to her the notebook containing the sketch of Jane Carlyle. Upon reading the original material, she was "astounded" to find that Froude had apparently published the *Reminiscences* against her uncle's wishes; in a letter sent to the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph,* she accused Froude of bad faith. Both newspapers published the letter, which contained the final lines from the section on Jane Carlyle, removed by Froude from his edition:

> I still mainly mean to *burn* this Book before my own departure; but feel that I shall always have a kind of grudge to do it, and an indolent excuse, "Not *yet;* wait, any day that can be done!"—and that it is possible the thing *may* be left behind me, legible to interested survivors,—*friends* only, I will hope, and with *worthy* curiosity, not *un*worthy!
>
> In which event, I solemnly forbid them, each and all, to *publish* this Bit of Writing *as it stands here*; and warn them that *without fit editing* no *part* of it should be printed (nor as far as I can order, *shall* ever be);—and that the "*fit* editing" of perhaps nine-tenths of it will, after I am gone, have become *impossible.* T.C. (Saturday, 28th July 1866)

This public slur stung Froude, who quickly responded in the newspapers. He explained that the directive to burn the papers was made in 1866 and that Carlyle had subsequently placed in his hands a vast collection of materials relating to his wife, "with a personal request that I would take charge of it, and would do with it whatever might seem best to me after he was gone." He hastened to add that Carlyle, in his will, had explicitly directed that Froude's opinion was "to be accepted as his own." In the preface to the *Reminiscences,* Froude left no doubt as to the sensitive nature of the material Carlyle had entrusted to him: "His own and Mrs. Carlyle's journals were records of their most secret thoughts." But when Froude had read through those journals with an eye toward writing Carlyle's biography, he found that they were "far too valuable to be broken up and employed in any composition of my own." Instead, Froude suggested that they be printed with "the requisite omissions" immediately after Carlyle's death. Carlyle agreed and even tried to revise the journals himself, but found the effort too much.

Froude, however, was not content to let the matter rest. With the publication of each new volume, he provided additional details about what was obviously becoming an unbearable burden of responsibility. In his preface to the *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle,* he revealed

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that shortly before Carlyle's death, they had discussed the letters: "Mr. Carlyle did not order the publication of these letters, though he anxiously desired it." And in the final volume of the biography, Froude returned to the same conversation. This time he added that Carlyle had asked him "very solemnly, and in a tone of anxiety," what he proposed to do with the letters and memorials and reminiscences. Carlyle, Froude reported, was "so sorrowful and earnest—though still giving no positive order—that I could make no objection." Froude affirmed that he would publish them; Carlyle was "entirely satisfied, and never spoke about it again."

What is most striking about Froude's account is the seeming lack of agency on Carlyle's part. But this is in keeping with the haphazard way in which the *Reminiscences* came into being. When Jane Carlyle died, Carlyle was devastated. And in those darkest hours, his only solace was reminiscing in a notebook about his "dearest Jeannie." Memories of her life before they met—composed from the many lively stories with which she used to delight her friends—and of their forty years together flooded from Carlyle's grief, one memory giving rise to another. Time had already blurred certain details, and this led Carlyle to seek more tangible memories, voices, and thoughts through her letters and diaries. Yet she had burned her papers to protect them from hungry eyes—"She wrote at various times in Note-books; refusing all sight of them even to me: but she has destroyed nearly every vestige of them."

In returning to his wife through a few surviving remnants, Carlyle was even more pained to remember her terrible suffering from "neuralgic rheumatism"; he suffered as never before as he relived her wretched sleeplessness and her fears that she would go mad. The more he recalled, the more he was tormented by his belated awareness that he had failed her, so absorbed had he been in writing *Frederick the Great,* "a nightmare" that had lasted thirteen years. Carlyle was overcome with remorse for his thoughtlessness: "Privately, she at that time felt convinced she was dying:—dark winter, and such the weight of misery, and utter decay of strength;—and, night after night my theme to her, *Mollwitz!* This she owned to me, within the last year or two;—which how could I listen to without shame and abasement?" As her health deteriorated, others attended her, and Carlyle recalled that he "only visited the sick-room at intervals. . . . To this hour it is inconceivable to me how I could continue 'working'; as I nevertheless certainly for much the most part did."

Two ways of setting the past right, to expiate his neglect of his beloved, began to overtake him. The publication of his memoirs would show the world how she had suffered and how he had failed her. But he also saw with unbearable clarity what he had failed to see when she was alive: his wife had sacrificed her life for him. In one particularly painful entry, Carlyle describes reading and arranging her letters of 1857: "What a piercing radiancy of meaning to me in those dear records, hastily thrown

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off, full of misery, yet of bright eternal love. . . . Oh, I was blind not to see how *brittle* was that thread of noble celestial (almost more than terrestrial) life; how *much* it was all in all to me and how *impossible* it should long be left with me." He is struck by her "all-illuminating brilliancy, penetration, recognition, wise discernment, just enthusiasm, humor, grace, patience, courage, love," and he asks himself, "Ought all this to be lost, or kept to myself, and the brief time that now belongs to *me*? Can nothing of it be saved, then, for the worthy . . . ? Already I feel it to have become uncertain to me whether at least this poor Note-book *ought* to be burnt ere my decease or left to its chances among my survivors?" But now the only traces of her brilliance were in her private letters and what remained of her diary. To restore what should have been hers—Carlyle declares her genius superior to the "Sands and Eliots and babbling *cohue* of 'celebrated scribbling women'"—he vows to collect and annotate his wife's private letters.

Apparently Carlyle never returned to his private outpouring of grief and self-abasement. As Froude announced in his preface, when Carlyle gave him his papers he "scarcely remembered what they contained, but with characteristic fearlessness, gave me leave to use as I might please." And with his own characteristic guilelessness, Froude described Carlyle's condition at the time of writing the *Reminiscences* as "so singular" that "he was afterwards unconscious what he had done; and when ten years later I found the Irving MS. and asked him about it, he did not know to what I was alluding." To another biographer, Carlyle's "unconsciousness" might have suggested that such writing be relegated to the darkness of oblivion. But Froude was no typical biographer. Not only was he Carlyle's devoted and longtime friend (the two men had taken walks together three times a week, at Carlyle's request, for twenty years), he was also an ardent disciple and had taken to heart the motto that Carlyle had affixed to *Past and Present:* "Life is earnest."

We need to pause for a moment to reflect on this phrase, since in our time of unrelieved cynicism and irony it has become largely unintelligible. Indeed, ever since Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first performed, earnestness has been a term of derision used to mock the Victorians. But in an age when religious belief and the social order were increasingly under assault, Carlyle's "gospel of earnestness," as it was called, was a revelation. To be in earnest intellectually meant to have, or to seek to have, genuine, intensely examined beliefs about the fundamental questions of life; it meant refusing to accept received wisdom, or to treat such questions as if they were an intellectual game. To be in earnest morally meant to recognize life as something more elevated and more serious than moneymaking and sensual gratification; it meant asserting an absolute and transcendent moral and spiritual order and

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struggling arduously against the forces of evil, both in one's own soul and in society. For Carlyle, earnestness was a prime virtue of the hero; and in *Heroes and Hero-Worship,* he praised Mohammed as "one of those who cannot *but* be in earnest. . . . While others walk in formulas and hearsays, contented enough to dwell there, this man could not screen himself in formulas; he was alone with his own soul and the reality of things."

Thus, when Froude published Carlyle's *Reminiscences* he was acting in good faith, for he believed himself to be an apostle of earnestness. In the final volume of the biography, Froude described his motives with transparent simplicity: having read Carlyle's memoir of his wife, he was deeply moved by his master's "humility" and "intense truthfulness." It struck him as "something so beautiful, so unexampled in the whole of literature, that [he] could but admire it with all [his] heart." Even if Carlyle could no longer remember what he had written in those lost days following his wife's death, Froude, in an act of piety and devotion, felt obliged to carry out his master's original intent:

> He had here built together, at once a memorial of the genius which had been sacrificed to himself, and of those faults in himself, which, though they were faults merely of an irritable temperament, and though he extravagantly exaggerated them, had saddened her married life. . . . He regarded it evidently as an expiation of his own conduct, all that he had now to offer, and something which removed the shadow between himself and her memory.

But Froude also knew that Carlyle had put him in an impossible moral predicament. If he suppressed the memoir and letters, he would prevent Carlyle from completing his "brave" act of "atonement"; if he gave them to the world, he risked "the reproach . . . of having uncovered the errors of the best friend that I had ever had."

Here we are confronted with an invasion of privacy where the violator is impelled not by idle curiosity, by a perverse desire to transgress limits, or by a mean spirit of debunking. Rather, Froude unveiled Carlyle's most secret thoughts as an act of earnestness that conformed to his own teachings. That the *Reminiscences* were one long affirmation of Carlyle's earnestness was never doubted by those who knew him best, but both the public's capacity to apprehend Carlyle's "intense truthfulness" and Froude's wisdom in publishing such a frank confession were put into question as soon as the book appeared. In a letter of April 1881 to Mary Carlyle, Charles Eliot Norton called the *Reminiscences* "one of the most human of books; as sincere and serious a record of life as exists anywhere." Those who could "read it aright" would immediately discern Carlyle's true character: "The very parts of it with which most fault is found are either evidences of an uncompromising sincerity, or of an

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exaggeration of expressions that indicate the simplicity and tenderness of the heart from which they proceeded." But Mary Carlyle and Norton, too, were concerned about readers who had not embraced the gospel of earnestness and were instead merely curious. Both agreed that Froude was at fault for including passages that "would give false impressions to the curious public, and be misinterpreted by it." In a letter of September 1882, Norton stated the problem: Carlyle would "always suffer from the lack of the sense of humour in mankind, and from the impossibility that the insincere should understand the frankness of genuine sincerity."

Though Norton is little known today, except perhaps as the first professor of fine arts at Harvard, in his own time he was at the center of American intellectual and political life. He helped found two of the most influential journals—*The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Nation*—and for four years he co-edited *The North American Review*. One reason for his present-day obscurity is that, except for a study of medieval art, Dante translations, and uncollected essays, Norton's published oeuvre is composed of editions of writings and letters of his friends, who were the most revered figures of the time—Emerson, Longfellow, and Lowell in America, and Ruskin and Carlyle in England. At Emerson's request and with Carlyle's blessing, Norton edited their correspondence, which appeared in 1883. Norton had known Carlyle only since 1869, when the sage was seventy-four, but their letters testify to a growing closeness. And as the controversy between Mary Carlyle and Froude grew more bitter, she enlisted Norton in an effort to restore public faith in Carlyle. Thus he edited the *Early Letters of Thomas Carlyle* (1886) and *Correspondence Between Goethe and Carlyle* (1887), and brought out a new edition of Carlyle's *Reminiscences* (1887). Froude's editing of the *Reminiscences*, Norton charged, was of "the most perfunctory, indifferent, and inexcusably careless character."

Just as the gospel of earnestness has become alien to us, so too has the sensibility that Norton exemplified—what I call the reticent sensibility. This is largely because our post-Freudian and media-saturated world of constant publicity, exposure, unmasking, and confession has incited feelings of entitlement to know everything about everyone. What were once considered the defining qualities of civilized life—tact, discretion, reserve, decorum, propriety—are now despised as obstacles to knowledge, as forms of guilty cover-up or psychological repression. Yet at their core was a profound respect for privacy, for it was commonly held that privacy was the sole guarantor of individual dignity. Nowhere is this understanding more eloquently expressed than in a letter Norton wrote to Ruskin in 1873, in which he apologized for his inability to return one of Ruskin's letters. Referring to his "old custom" of burning not only "trivial notes" but also extremely personal letters—"those that are like intimate talks, when confidences are given to which no third person should be privy"—Norton invoked the sanctity of privacy, and with it the respectful

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distance owed to private matters: "I hold these last letters sacred, and often make a holocaust of what it pains me to sacrifice, and of what I would keep among my treasures if I could be sure they would be buried with me." Norton's confession that he has burned "those [letters] in which you told me of sorrowful experience in love, for they were secrets between you and me" reveals the kind of care and consideration at the heart of the reticent sensibility. Personal affairs, if they are to be properly construed, require sympathetic imagination and deep knowledge of those involved. They must be secreted away, or they risk the uncomprehending and distorting gaze of curious strangers.

It is precisely this understanding of the inherent fragility of private life—that the wrong kind of attention can reduce the weightiest personal matters to frivolous gossip or blow them into sensational scandal—that escaped Froude. Where Norton was so protective of Ruskin's dignity that he burned his most revealing letters, Froude believed that the Carlyles' most revealing letters could and must withstand the light of publicity in the name of truth. In his preface to the biography, he explained that it would be unfaithful to Carlyle to exhibit only "the fair and beautiful side" of his own and his wife's letters. Such a portrait, Froude insisted, would have been "without individuality—an ideal, or, in other words, an 'idol,' to be worshipped one day and thrown away the next. Least of all men could such idealising be ventured with Carlyle, to whom untruth of any kind was abominable." And in the final volume of the biography, Froude's description of his own commitment to candor reveals a biographer so confident of the integrity of his subject's life that he is oblivious to the dangers of exposure:

> To have been reticent would have implied that there was something to hide, and, taking Carlyle all in all, there never was a man—I at least never knew of one—whose conduct in life would better bear the fiercest light which can be thrown upon it. . . . Tender-hearted and affectionate he was beyond all men whom I have ever known. . . . There was no falsehood and there was no concealment in him. The same true nature showed itself in his life and in his words.

Norton's editorial practices could not have been in starker contrast. Where Froude believed it was his duty to lift the veil from Carlyle's private life, it was precisely this protective covering that Norton was most intent on preserving. In the preface to *Letters of James Russell Lowell* (1894), he declared, "Portions of every man's life are essentially private and knowledge of them belongs by right only to those intimates whom he himself may see fit to trust with his confidence." Addressing the suspicious habit of mind that can see in reticence only some form of extenuation, Norton

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was adamant that "there was nothing in Mr. Lowell's life to be concealed or excused. But he had the reserves of a high and delicate nature, reserves to be no less respected after death than during life."

Thus, Norton was incensed that Froude in his biography had dared to portray the Carlyles' courtship, troubled engagement, and early marriage. Even worse, he had published entire love letters, exposing the couple's private life at its most vulnerable moments. In a letter to Mary Carlyle, Norton exploded: "It is impossible to forgive him for the gross indelicacy of publishing the most private, sacred, and tender expressions of their love." Even though the publication of such letters and even more compromising material is routine today, it was not until the eighteenth century that biographers ever made use of personal correspondence; what is more, Froude was one of the first to include love letters as well as diary entries. These incursions into the private sphere were hurtful in their own right, but Norton also believed that Froude had produced an "incorrect" picture of the Carlyles' courtship and marriage—one that was "injurious to their memory." In an effort to repair the damage, Norton published a few love letters from the original correspondence in his edition of Carlyle's *Early Letters* (1886), though he confessed that he had read them "with extreme reluctance, and with reverential respect for the sacredness of their contents."

In an appendix to the letters and in an essay that appeared in the *New Princeton Review* the same year, Norton attacked Froude for excerpting letters out of context, for providing misleading glosses, and for betraying Carlyle's "personal confidence" by failing to ensure that "nothing be exposed to unfriendly eyes that could convey a false impression, or by misinterpretation do wrong to the memory of his friend." And Carlyle was more liable to misinterpretation than others because of the idiosyncratic quality of his conversation. "If repeated—if even reported word for word—it is likely to produce a different effect from that which it made when first spoken," Norton warned, "owing to the loss of the incommunicable look, the evanescent air, the qualifying and inimitable tone."

Norton was not alone in his harsh estimate of Froude. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic assailed Froude for his obtuseness in the face of sacred memories. They were appalled by his woefully deficient sense of proportion, of tact, and of humor. But it was not just Froude who was charged with these failings. Carlyle, too, was criticized, not only for preserving his own revealing papers, but also—and even worse—for invading his wife's privacy by reading her diary and implicitly authorizing its publication along with her personal letters. Carlyle was even accused of presenting a one-dimensional, idealized portrait of his wife that failed to capture her comic spirit and vivacity.

Froude was mortified. He sought to defend his good name in the

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pages of the *Times*; in a November 1886 letter to the editor, he again told how Carlyle had chosen him as his biographer and how he believed he had fulfilled his commission. As for his controversial revelations, Froude, obviously exasperated, wrote:

> Here I confess I think some blame attaches to Carlyle himself. If, in remorse for real or imagined faults of his own, he thought it right to put together these memorials, he should have himself decided whether they were to be printed or not. The responsibility should not have been left to a friend. He told me often that he ought to do penance . . . but, as a fact, he has left me to stand in the pillory for him, and I am tired of the situation.

He also blamed Norton for having "disregarded absolutely the words in [Carlyle's] will which were intended for my protection."

Froude was further vindicated by James Fitzjames Stephen in a long letter that set out all the events leading up to Froude's letter to the *Times*. Stephen was a judge and legal scholar, but he was also a well-known writer whose work appeared in the most important journals of the day. For close to fifteen years, he had been "the intimate friend and constant companion" of both Carlyle and Froude. This letter was meant to be widely circulated, and in no uncertain terms he exonerated Froude: "I know you have suffered much worry and annoyance from all this matter. . . . After a close intimacy of nearly thirty years, it would be impossible to me to believe that your conduct had fallen short of the highest standard of truth and honour." Stephen praised Froude's devotion to Carlyle: "The most affectionate son could not have acted better to the most venerated father. You cared for him, soothed him, protected him as a guide might protect a weak old man down a steep and painful path." Stephen concluded that "in order to present a true picture of [Carlyle] as he really was," Froude was charged "with treachery, violation of confidence, and every imaginable base motive, when you were in fact guilty of no other fault than that of practising Mr. Carlyle's great doctrine that men ought to tell the truth."

Matters were further complicated by the fact that this battle over Carlyle's (and finally Froude's) reputation involved men who belonged to the same circle. Stephen was acquainted with Norton, and Norton was a close friend of Stephen's brother, Leslie. Leslie Stephen, in a biographical sketch, defended Froude against the charge of "maliciously misrepresent[ing] the man whom he chose as his prophet." In addition, Ruskin, who was also an old friend of all concerned, sided with Froude and wrote his dearest friend in the world, Norton, a number of furious letters (though it is not clear how seriously we should take them, since Ruskin had begun to lose his mind at the time). And Norton was also acquainted with Froude, though he had never trusted or liked him.

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Norton was thus the only one of Carlyle's close friends who doubted Froude. Perhaps this was because of his deep affection for Carlyle, who had provided him with solace the winter after his own wife's untimely death. His tender memories of grief and sorrow were no doubt intermingled with his tender feelings for Carlyle, and the public airing of Carlyle's marriage would then have been all the more unbearable. What is more, Emerson and Longfellow had both died only a year after Carlyle, and Norton was clearly dismayed by the passing of that distinguished generation. He thought of himself as the keeper of their spirits, and regarded Carlyle as the most brilliant of their stellar company. Indeed, his attack on Froude in the *New Princeton Review* begins with a passage from a letter from Emerson, urging Norton to "take care hereafter that [Carlyle's] memory suffers no detriment on this side of the sea."

Notwithstanding the faith of Carlyle's intimates in Froude, Norton's fears were soon borne out. What attracted the attention of readers were precisely the aspects of Carlyle's private life that were most open to misinterpretation. Even Froude acknowledged this when he complained in a letter, "How dreary it is to me to hear myself praised for frankness, when I find the world all fastening on Carlyle's faults, while the splendid qualities are ignored or forgotten." Out of sheer frustration, he spoke of the biography in the language of his critics: "Let them look into their own miserable souls, and ask themselves how *they* would bear to have their own private histories ransacked and laid bare." Yet he still held fast to his project: "I deliberately say (and I have said it in the book) that Carlyle's was the finest nature I have ever known. It is a Rembrandt picture, but what a picture!"

Thus we see the fate of earnestness in a world of curious gossip-seekers. If the story ended here, it would be unhappy, even tragic, for so much harm and misery came with the noble intent of doing Carlyle justice. But because of Norton's new editions of Carlyle's works, Froude, in a moment of anguish, recorded in a private notebook all the damaging material that he had omitted from the *Reminiscences,* along with rumors and hearsay about the Carlyles' marriage. Unfortunately he neglected to burn it, so when Alexander Carlyle, Jr., published *New Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* in 1903, eight years after Froude's death, and used it to attack Froude anew, Froude's children attempted to vindicate their father by publishing his private notebook (titled *My Relations with Carlyle),* which also included James Fitzjames Stephen's letter and Carlyle's will.

The appearance of the Froude pamphlet set off another round of angry attacks and counterattacks, but this time the violation of privacy was undeniable and complete. Although there is no credible proof of Froude's posthumous revelations, they immediately became part of popular lore: that the Carlyles' marriage was consumed by fierce and violent

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quarrels; that Carlyle's "wild irritability" had driven his wife to distraction; that she was distraught enough to consider taking her life; that Carlyle had on one occasion used physical violence against her; that he had been infatuated with the brilliant Lady Ashburton and that Jane Carlyle was jealous because he had given to another woman the "intellectual and spiritual affection" that rightly belonged to her; and finally that Carlyle was, as Froude put it, "sexually incompetent."

These revelations quickly assumed an unwarranted magnitude and importance. When a new edition of the *Reminiscences* appeared in 1932, the introduction made clear that the appetite for gossip and sensationalism had overtaken any serious interest in Carlyle's ideas: "Many people who knew not a word that Carlyle had written continued for years to discuss the question whether he was a good husband." What is worse, the private affairs of the Carlyles became "a by-word for scoffers, a kind of puzzle in domesticity, a mere matrimonial problem, the subject of pitiful controversy prolonged and degraded to the level of some notorious squabble in the Divorce Court."

In our own time, these delicate matters have received even rougher treatment. Short entries in reference books like the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* or the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* make gratuitous mention of Carlyle's domestic troubles, without mentioning the dispute over their initial airing. The *Britannica* contains an entire section on the Carlyle marriage, only to conclude, "In spite of their strong mutual affection, [it] was full of quarrels and misunderstandings." And this is followed by a stunning non sequitur, delivered in the most casual manner: "Those who knew him best believed Carlyle to be impotent."

In all the writing about biography at the close of the nineteenth century, there was a certainty of purpose: its aim was to reveal character, to satisfy, as M. O. W. Oliphant put it, "the legitimate and noble interest which mankind takes in every man sufficiently distinct in character or genius as to have identified himself from the crowd." Biography was regarded as a genre of moral instruction. From our contemporary standpoint, what is surprising about the controversy over Carlyle is that the reading public, which had accepted the myth of the Byronic hero as tortured genius, courageous taboo breaker, and inspired madman, was apparently unprepared to expand the category to include a genius-sage who also happened to be a tormented social misfit and neglectful husband. Instead, as a consequence of Froude's biography, Carlyle, in Leslie Stephen's words, was "too often judged by his defects, and regarded as a selfish and eccentric misanthrope with flashes of genius, rather than as a man with many of the highest qualities of mind and character clouded by constitutional infirmities." Even more pointedly, the essayist Agnes Repplier observed that "the result of [Froude's] deed was the chilling of men's affections, the withering of men's esteem."

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But it is not only the expectation that biographies be full-scale exposés of their subjects' sex lives, dissolute morals, and mental breakdowns that distinguishes our world from that of the Victorians. Even more remarkable is the fact that the modern reader will have a hard time discerning what nineteenth-century readers found so shocking and disturbing about the Carlyle volumes. Where critics like Oliphant were alarmed by a new social phenomenon ("that prying curiosity which loves to investigate circumstances, and thrust itself into the sanctuaries of individual feeling"), we live in a time so familiar with the contents of those sanctuaries, where literally nothing is sacred, that we no longer recognize when we are in the presence of things we should not know. To put the matter in this way is, of course, to risk the charge of puritanism, psychological repression, or a failure to face up to reality. But such an interpretation only testifies to how impoverished our categories of thought have become, how narrow our range of emotions. This is not to advocate an uncritical revival of the reticent sensibility; there were good reasons to reject aspects of it. Still, given that we now live in a society in which a president can be impeached for lying about an affair—in which we have abandoned conventions that once set limits to what we could know about others—it is high time to reconsider whether earlier understandings of privacy might replenish our depleted intellectual, moral, and emotional resources.

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Felinus

J. S. A. LOWE

A sleepy Nina plunks down, curls up
inches from my face, purring fervently
until her very bones vibrate, as does my chest.
Ninotchka, please, I say with
difficulty, but her half-eyes conceal themselves
behind their milky nictitating membrane; what's still visible
mingles green cloisonné & gold leaf.
Feminal, flush, she's intact yet all mottled: when I breathe
laboriously out, her fur riffles white under black & rust.
Each ivory whisker's tipped with madder stipple, even
the freckled roof of her mouth
comes purfled with ridges and inky cornices.
(I can see inside when she yawns.) My arms are in a weird
position, I can't hold up my novel, so I stare at her face. Little fangs
curve out from underneath her speckled upper lip.
My eyeball-catechizing doesn't seem to unnerve her.
After minutes of frantic frilling, she suddenly emits a tiny sigh
and is utterly asleep. I know her body could be halfway across
the room before her brain came fully to, if needed.
Her limbs, soft as an infant's, would tauten to alert
in seconds flat, total cathexis. I try
to lift the book again. She
presses her paws up to her face in a fitful unconscious
tight stretch, each claw fractionally extended. Then sighs again,
her toes relaxed and pink. Each piece of being
come to Nina does itself, goes right back again. There's no concatenation
in her small skull, no filaments confusing
where it's supposed to be, what it's up to now.
Her chest rises and falls. Gradually, mine
too. No mind, no problem. Presence
feels enough. Her flatlined mind's
perpetual felicity.

J. S. A. Lowe teaches English composition at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. Her poems have appeared in the *Denver Quarterly* and *Salamander*, and are forthcoming in *Fish Drum* and the *Paris Review*.

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The Come As You Are Not Party

NATALIA RACHEL SINGER

My first neighbor and I were wheeled together into the maternity ward nursery on a cold October night in 1957. She was the daughter of the thirteen-year-old who shared my mother's hospital room, and when I was growing up, my mother would talk about the teenager often, then change the subject to the shortness of my shorts. I used to wonder if the girl who shared my birthday was anything like me. Did she love reading novels and climbing trees? Was her mother as beautiful and crazy as mine? I liked to think that we were secret sharers and that we would recognize each other if we met.

When I was thirteen I did not become a teen mom. The bearded longhair I fell for was not some hippie sniffing for jailbait—my mother's nightmare at the time—but Jesus Christ, who caught my young and yearning fancy at a Baptist summer camp. I was there thanks to my across-the-street neighbor, Stephanie Sullivan, a skinny, pretty girl who could make anything, even fundamentalist Christianity, look cool.

Stephanie befriended me when my mother, newly divorced, moved us from Indiana to Cleveland, the same summer Barry Goldwater tried to yank the presidency from Lyndon Johnson. While my mother lay in bed chain-smoking in her underwear, surrounded by empty coffee cups and half-eaten baked goods, I fled to the order of the Sullivan home. Stephanie had hair so long she could sit on it, a wardrobe of matching pedal pushers and ruffled midriffs, and a menagerie of stuffed animals

Natalia Rachel Singer is Associate Professor of English at St. Lawrence University and a contributing editor to the *North American Review*. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Harper's*, the *Iowa Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among other publications.

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she was happy to share. We were poor and the Sullivans were comfortable: the mother a real-estate agent, the father an industrial chemist who had studied classical violin. I wanted them to adopt me.

When Stephanie invited me to Camp Patmos the summer before ninth grade, it took some major persuasion to get my mother's permission. We were non-practicing Jews with liberal political views, and my mother had not forgotten how Stephanie had spread a rumor through our first grade class that if Johnson were re-elected, he would make all children attend school seven days a week. But the real problem had to do more with geography than with ideology. By now I had developed breasts, and my mother's spaced-out neglect had morphed into a puritanical obsession with my body and its comings and goings. Whenever I went out, I had to give her a phone number where she could reach me. The camp was on a small island on Lake Erie. There was only one phone, at a gas station two miles from our secluded outpost.

That year my mother had turned from slacker roommate to stalker. She showed up everywhere—the ice skating rink, my friends' houses, Friday-night dances at the junior high—convinced I was about to get pregnant. That I had yet to begin menstruating and was the least sexually advanced girl in my circle—*my* puritanical reaction to *her* disturbing displays of female dishevelment—did not factor into her theories; she took me to a doctor for a pregnancy test. I wanted to go to that inaccessible-by-phone Christian camp just to get some rest.

My week at Camp Patmos was the first real vacation of my life. When we weren't singing hymns or making stained glass portraits of Jesus, we sailed, canoed, played volleyball, and hiked through a forest redolent of wintergreen and lemon balm. One midnight I crept out to enjoy the woods in solitude. The buckeye trees swayed, the mosquitoes hummed, the earth pulsed like a muffled drum. This music inhabited my body, my arms tan and lean, my thigh-length hair (it was now as long as Stephanie's) lifted by the breeze. There was no division between self and place, no over there.

When I tried to describe this experience to a sympathetic counselor, she explained it in terms of the one theological construct she knew: Jesus's love was awakening me, calling me home. That night we were told in an open-air sermon that if we joined the counselors waiting in the trees and accepted the Lord Jesus as our personal savior, the joy of Christian fellowship was ours for eternity. My conversion took less than a minute. My high washed away my anxieties about everything—the chaotic state of the world, my family's poverty, my tardy menses, and that morning's big upset: my mother had sleuthed out the gas station's phone number and made the owner drive to camp, roust me from my bunk in front of my friends, and take me back to call her.

After I returned home, it didn't take long for my old skeptical self to

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spoil the party. On Sundays, I listened attentively to the sermons of Stephanie's pastor, but they seemed anti-youth, racist, and crazy. Rock music, for example, was the work of the devil because of its roots in Africa, a continent governed by Satan himself. The historical Christ, contrary to artists' renderings, had worn his hair in a crew cut.

A terror of something—the body? the questioning mind?—seemed to lie at the root of my new church's hateful admonitions. Where was creation? Mystery? Compassion? The flesh made into the word? Try as I might, I never once felt the rapture that I'd known at Camp Patmos, inside Stephanie's church or any other. Nor did I see how my fellow teens could be feeling it either as they sat around me in their best pastel skirts and shirts and ties, passing love notes and slam books during the service.

In fact, Stephanie's after-school Christian youth group felt to me like one big slam. One afternoon these new friends gathered on the couch of our shabby studio apartment. "Let's pray for Judy," they said with solemnity. "Did you see all those hickeys?" My mother, in nondenominational collusion with any prurient force, lurked nearby in the kitchen, gathering ammunition.

When I left Stephanie's church, the Vietnam War was still claiming lives, and I was frightened both by the violence flickering from the TV and by my mother's ever-intensifying fear of the world. After I started high school the next year, she began to lock me inside our apartment "for protection." I had to climb out the bedroom window to go to school, where, as an earnest overachiever from a very strange home, I felt like an outcast in a sea of hard-partying, cynical seventies drones. I dreamed of a green paradise where I could romp in the woods writing poetry.

I didn't give fundamentalist Christianity another thought until ten years had passed and my boyfriend and I accidentally caught a few minutes of *The 700 Club.* By then I had been born again as a writer and feminist, and Seattle—where Joe and I were "living in sin," as his Episcopal minister brother liked to say—felt like the verdant utopia I'd been longing for all my life. We were switching channels when we came upon a televangelist screaming that Satan had taken over the women's movement. "Great toupee," I said, laughing, but there was something about the man's anger that reminded me of that pastor in Cleveland who insisted that the historical Jesus had worn a crew cut, and I felt a combination of déjà vu and dread.

"These guys are going mainstream," Joe said. He'd heard about a recent Heritage Foundation gathering where a minister had shouted, "We're here to turn the clock back to 1954 in this country." Ronald Reagan, who had the endorsement of the Moral Majority, was our new president, and Paul Weyrich, one of its founders, was introducing a bill in Congress called the Family Protection Act, whereby federal funding

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would be denied to schools that issued textbooks portraying women in any but traditional roles, laws protecting battered wives from their husbands would be repealed, and federally funded legal aid for women seeking abortion counseling or divorce would be banned. It seemed like a good time to leave the country, but we were too broke to go anywhere.

When we had moved on to admiring the televangelist's wide lapels, my mother phoned from Cleveland, as she often did, to warn me about the unplanned pregnancy she had had when she was my age, twenty-three. After I'd passed the first milestone of thirteen, she'd started to focus on twenty-three as the Big Year, using the back-alley abortion that my father had pressured her into before they got married as a reminder of how far a gal could fall. "So what are you doing about birth control?" she asked.

"Chastity belt," I said.

Oddly enough, after one of her phone calls I'd often come down with a nasty bladder infection and have to swear off sex for weeks.

Our downstairs neighbors, Vicki and Glenn, did not have sex. Although Glenn was clearly in love with Vicki, the two lived together like brother and sister. They did not date other people either, and since they seldom left the house, together or apart, it seemed unlikely that they would ever have prospects.

We'd been living above them for nearly a year when they revealed their non-conjugal status. Until then I had considered them living proof that opposites attract: she almost 40, with a small, girlish body, long raven hair, and a Brooklyn accent; he 28, with a plump face, wispy blond hair, bulging blue eyes, and a local twang. They did everything together—gardening, shopping, lounging on the porch while they listened again and again to "If You Could Read My Mind," by Gordon Lightfoot, whom Joe called Gordon Clubfoot but I secretly liked. They had met at a spiritualist church, and on any mild Saturday you could see them in the hammock taking turns reading aloud from books on reincarnation and millennial disasters.

A few weeks after Reagan's inauguration, we finally said yes to one of their dinner invitations. The vegetarian Indian banquet they prepared for us was sumptuous. It was enjoyable to eat it on the floor, on plump lavender silk pillows, while listening to Ravi Shankar, the air musky with jasmine incense. To look at the purple walls of their apartment, adorned with tapestries and beads and posters of unicorns and rainbows, you would have thought it was 1971, not 1981. Our neighbors' insularity was both psychological and cultural: they had no interest whatsoever in literature, history, art, government, science, film, the outdoors, or anything other than past lives and something Vicki called natural hygiene, which had to do with eating vegetarian food, wearing only cotton and silk, and avoiding contact with anything artificial, including medicines, vitamins,

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and chemical forms of birth control. We two couples did not exchange autobiographies—something most West Coast people did rather promiscuously back then—and if I hadn't stumbled into the wrong room on my way to the bathroom, I might never have found out about their sleeping arrangements.

I walked into a tiny room that was unremarkable except for one decidedly unspiritual feature—the *Playboy* calendar hanging above the futon. Miss February's pink nipples swam like tropical fish toward the viewer. There were *Playboy* magazines piled up beside the bed, not books about UFOs, as I would have expected. The larger room next door featured a matching calendar—*Playgirl.* I had never seen one before.

When I emerged into the living room, my face probably flushed, Vicki explained, "Glenn and I used to be lovers, but when we broke up five years ago, he didn't have anywhere to go. He helps me out by doing all the guy chores."

I was reminded of an open house Joe and I had just been to at a commune of Polarity Therapy practitioners who told us that they divided the household tasks along traditional gender lines because "women are naturally more nurturing, men are naturally the hunters." Their body therapy was designed to restore everyone's internal male-female balance, which had been thrown out of whack by a women's movement that, though "well-intended," had "gone too far": my first hint that a few strands of the Left and the Right were converging somewhere peculiar. Joe and I decided to pass on the free "corrective" massage.

"I have to make up for my past-life karma with Vicki," Glenn said gravely, stroking her back, his fingers stained yellow with saffron. She flinched. I understood at that moment that this pair of non-lovers were the horniest people alive and also that they were stuck to each other like wet chapatis.

"To new friends," Vicki said, clinking our herbal tea mugs together, inviting us—imploring us balefully, it seemed—to share their life of time-warped exile.

Joe and I had been slow to accept Vicki and Glenn's overtures of friendship, in part because they had no friends. We had intuited that if we gave them any encouragement, they would latch onto us like barnacles. My mother's phone calls were so intrusive and draining that I felt I had to protect myself from the demands of other needy people. I was in my own self-imposed exile that year—from the conservative Republican zeitgeist and from the workaday world. I was living on unemployment while trying to write fiction, and I was even more of a homebody than my neighbors. In my attempts to find a voice, I was trying to chisel away at my old peppy, goal-driven, midwestern self and find out who lay underneath. It had become a strain to have a casual conversation. When the man at the

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corner store said something about the weather, I found it physically painful to do more than nod.

I was also still searching for a spiritual teaching to explain the euphoria I had felt in the woods at Camp Patmos. I recognized that Vicki and Glenn were soul-searching too, and I did not want to judge them harshly. The one lingering tenet of Christianity by which I tried to abide was to love thy neighbor as thyself. Still, I would have preferred to love my neighbors from a distance had Vicki not stopped me on the stairs a few days later with earth-shattering news. "I'm pregnant," she said.

Had I misunderstood what separate bedrooms meant? "Glenn?" I asked tentatively.

"Are you kidding?" Without further ado she launched into the sad tale. It had all started when Vicki, who was a secretary at Rainier Bank, strained her neck while hunched over her brand-new word processor, perhaps in physical rebellion against such an unnatural technological advance. She found a chiropractor in the Yellow Pages—a "square," she pronounced him, complete with short hair, a wife and kids, and a big house in the suburbs. There were photos of his family plastered around the office. "A practicing Catholic," she added. "Definitely not my type."

Yet there, week after week in his capable hands, obviously starved for affection, she began to fantasize. She appealed at first to his stomach, baking him pies and cakes and cookies. When that didn't work, she wore slinky lingerie beneath her office attire. Then one day the good doctor gave her a *libidinal* adjustment, right there on the table. Now she was two months gone, her neck was killing her, and he was refusing to take her calls.

"What a nightmare! Do you want me to help you find an abortion clinic?" I blurted.

Vicki glared at me, the purple veins in her temples pulsing like ticks. "I can't believe you would even say such a thing!" she cried. "With all those souls on the other side waiting to save the world!"

I was astonished. Although I knew Vicki wasn't interested in politics, I had assumed—as she floated along in her purple skirts and embroidered muslin blouses, eating vegetarian meals in a haze of incense, alluding to her past lives in Egypt and in caves—that in social matters she was a liberal. I saw her as the poster child for the counterculture, which was now being labeled the New Age. Until this point I had believed that all people who dressed and talked like Vicki were socially progressive, that only Jerry Falwell types and the Pope were anti-choice. My encounter with the Polarity people notwithstanding, some months would pass before I understood that people who dealt tarot cards and carried crystals on their dashboards were not uniformly lefties; after all, we would soon learn that Nancy Reagan regularly consulted an astrologer. Eventually all my assumptions about Right and Left, counterculture and mainstream would break down. Perhaps the old cookie-cutter approaches to identity politics

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were too shallow and this melding was a good thing, but nonetheless, Vicki threw me. I thought, *Phyllis Schlafly in love beads. How weird is that?*

I tried another tactic. "But if the father isn't going to help you, how will you manage?" To be pregnant outside of matrimony—on this topic my mother and I were in perfect accord. I couldn't imagine anything worse.

"He'll come to his senses," she said. "And anyway, I've got Glenn."

As the winter rains fell, psychics and card readers appeared at the house. Vicki recited affirmations, smoking up the building with aromatic candles and herbs. She baked more pies for her child's father, only now she slipped locks of her hair into the filling to draw him back by voodoo.

I suggested to Vicki that she augment her magic with a visit to an obstetrician, and perhaps to an attorney to sort out the paternity issues. "Careful," Joe said. "She's sucking you in." I knew he was right, but Vicki was losing weight and I was worried about the baby. When she refused to go to a doctor, I found her a midwife from the Fremont Women's Clinic, a move that ruffled Glenn's feathers because he wanted to deliver the baby himself, in her bedroom, without the intervention of any "outsiders." Perhaps he had hoped that in this way he'd insinuate himself back into her bed.

Vicki was a terrible patient. Although blood tests showed her to be severely anemic, she refused the "unnatural" iron supplements and protein milk shakes I offered. It began to dawn on me that her rigidity resembled the other fundamentalisms that more and more were becoming part of America's public face. "Health fascist" was what Joe called her.

Despite Joe's intentions to steer clear of our neighbors, he got sucked in too. When the midwife finally convinced Vicki to agree to eat more grains and greens, Joe took them to our food co-op. He drove us all to the Ballard pool to get some exercise, although Vicki and Glenn stayed in the baby pool, tightly clutching the rim while they flailed their legs. Then, one sunny day in May, they called Joe to tell him their car battery was dead. He drove for nearly an hour to the suburb where they were stranded, only to discover that there were dozens of potentially helpful people at the garage sale where they'd just bought baby clothes, and that they had their own jumper cables. "These people are afraid of the world," Joe said.

When Vicki asked me to assist Glenn as birth coach, I didn't know how to say no. I believed they couldn't manage without me. I soon found myself attending weekly Lamaze classes with her and Glenn, visiting them every evening for practice breathing sessions, and being at Vicki's beck and call the rest of the time. Added to that was the burden of being Vicki's interpreter. The midwife, Miriam, was a lesbian feminist separatist; she hated the sulky Glenn, and she refused to deliver the baby on Vicki's bed if she had to stare up at a penis, even an airbrushed one, so I had to coax Vicki to take down her *Playgirl* calendar.

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Being a birth coach put a strain on my relationship with Joe. We had planned to spend most of our weekends that summer camping. Vicki demanded that I refrain from going anywhere she couldn't reach me by phone: another horrible déjà vu.

Joe and I had seldom quarreled about anything. He was tolerant of my mother's middle-of-the-night phone calls and supportive of my writing. When I realized my diaphragm was the source of my chronic cystitis, he converted to condoms without complaint. Then, on an afternoon in late May, one of those condoms broke and changed everything.

Perhaps *because* this seemed inevitable, a fate scripted for me since birth, I felt like the heroine of a Greek tragedy. Pregnancy was the physical embodiment of all my nightmares about confinement and suffocation. I lay sobbing on the couch, feeling sick, powerless, and doomed.

It was torture to attend birth class with Vicki and all the other happily expectant mothers; there was no way, given Vicki's views on abortion, that I could tell her. It was tough keeping my secret, though. I cried without provocation. My breasts swelled to painful proportions. I was queasy. When I looked into the mirror, someone else, someone like me but not me, glared back. *Traitor*, she said.

The worse I felt, the more demands Vicki made on me. By July, near her due date, she was still perilously underweight and the baby showed no signs of wanting out. On top of twice-daily breathing practice, she now required daily massages, guided relaxation, and forty-five-minute stints of communal meditation. She needed help pureeing several pounds of organic fruits and vegetables and freezing them to make natural baby food. And when she decided to blackmail the father into providing child support—writing him at his home address and threatening to tell his wife—she insisted that, as her birth coach and a writer to boot, I should help her craft a letter in coercive legalese.

And here's an interesting irony: the women's clinic scheduled my abortion for the same day as Vicki's due date. What were the odds of this juxtaposition? The way I saw it, Vicki and I were the mothers of two unseen children—one who was reluctant to be born, one who would never have the chance. In their own way they, too, were secret sharers.

Half convinced the tarot deck had somehow alerted Vicki to my betrayal, Joe and I were careful to make no noise as we hurried to our car on the morning of my abortion. I don't know if she would have called us murderers, but she would certainly have tried to talk us out of our decision. That day we caught an unexpected glimmer of the future—one in which this issue would polarize America, so much so that what I am about to say here will probably sound even more sacrilegious now than it would have then. But it's true: my abortion, at twenty-three, was as spiritual an experience as my night of mosquito-bitten rapture at thirteen. Not since Camp Patmos had I felt so strongly the presence of some-

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thing resembling God. Maybe it was just the Valium, but I don't think so.

That Joe and I were not ready to become parents was never a point of discussion. My childhood had ended in grade school when I realized that my mother was mentally ill. My father had abandoned our family after the divorce, and I'd vowed ever since that I would never end up a single mother. I felt I'd been an adult forever, and I wanted to learn to be young and free. Joe still felt like a kid, but with none of the fringe benefits. His job as an aide at United Cerebral Palsy paid minimum wage, and neither of us had health insurance.

But as much as I'd hardened myself against this situation, the moment I entered the clinic something inside me softened. Everyone I spoke to that day was respectful, understanding, and kind. And while I lay on the table waiting, I allowed myself to acknowledge, finally, that the uninvited guest inside me was alive. I remembered how as a child, when my friends and I confessed what we longed to possess when we grew up—long before a room of my own and a book contract topped the list—I had wished for a family. I had wanted to be the mother I lacked.

For the first time in almost a decade, I prayed. I asked my unborn child to feel the love I would have had for it even as I said good-bye.

And I heard an answer. It came in a whoosh of love that warmed me from my tangled hair to my feet, which dangled from the cold metal stirrups. I felt cared for in a way I never had in my mother's arms. A feeling of forgiveness seemed directed at me, but also seemed to flow through me, from whom or what I had no idea. Later, when I lay in the recovery room and listened to the sobs of a woman in the next room, I wanted to console her. I felt no physical discomfort, just a mild cramping—those breathing lessons had served me well—and no remorse, only relief and something like gratitude. But mostly I felt a flashback to what I'd experienced ten years before on the island: the feeling that all of us—people, trees, lake, mosquitoes, agnostics, and fundamentalists—were part of the same enterprise.

My mother phoned when we got home. We screened out her call. I never told her what had happened, but, interestingly enough, she changed the subject. I never had to hear about unplanned pregnancies again. From that point on, she wanted to know why I refused to give her any grandchildren.

It's funny how you can be perfectly fine one minute, and a few hours later everything has changed. That night, as I lay on the couch, I began to stew. Joe had gone to work after he took me home, and I was hurt beyond measure that he hadn't called in sick. Then, around midnight, he phoned from a bar; he and his friends from work were throwing a going-away bash for someone, *did I mind?* When I began to cry and he didn't change his plans, I moved beyond hot red anger to something cold

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and colorless and irrevocable. I had let myself, as my mother would say, get "knocked up and abandoned." And I called myself a feminist?

When Joe finally stumbled home at three that morning, drunk, I had already gone through the classifieds and circled the ads for cheap apartments. I was calm when I informed him I was moving out. I said I had never lived alone before, and I was excited at the prospect of becoming more independent. He didn't try to talk me out of it, but he apologized; he said he had felt lonely and needed his buddies. We held each other in mutual consolation, then watched, in a half-comatose state, scraps of the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer on our black-and-white TV. Somehow it struck us as funny that while the rest of the world was fixated on marriage, we were divvying up our books and bowls.

To celebrate our amiable split, we had a Come As You Are Not party, inviting everyone to dress as his or her opposite. I don't remember how we arrived at this idea, but it sounds to me now like the kind of thing I would have dreamed up back then to distance myself from a painful and private matter by making it into a joke.

Joe went as a young Republican, sporting a "Nixon Now" button and a conservative jacket and tie he'd found in a thrift-store bin. I squeezed myself into my old homecoming dance gown and called myself Betty-Jean Teen Queen, a virginal sweetheart from the Midwest. Joe's friends from work dressed predictably: Nanette, the Deadhead dancer from Georgia, as a hoopskirted southern belle; Nick, the socialist punk rocker, as a tweedy stockbroker. We played a drinking game called Wreck the Homecoming Queen, and I got sick. It's a good thing that Vicki, who was two weeks late by now, didn't go into labor. We had invited her and Glenn, but to our relief they'd decided to pass. I still wonder what they would have worn—doctors' scrubs?

Eventually people started ditching their costumes, and those who hadn't brought a change of clothes borrowed ours. I guess the strain of wearing our doppelgängers on our sleeves was too much. But I actually *had* been a wholesome teen queen. To feign normalcy in my high school, I'd done high kicks on the drill team and dated football studs (on the rare occasions when my mother let me out of the house). At seventeen, I had saved my McDonald's wages for three months to pay for my homecoming dress: I had loved the spaghetti straps and the little rust-colored jacket. Back then I'd been a prissy but shapely size five, but at nearly twenty-four, I was "husky" (as the elderly woman to whom I had recently offered my seat on the bus noted, patting my beefy arms) and, in strict observance of feminism's dictates, I'd stopped shaving my legs and armpits and wearing makeup. I had banished this younger self with the same ruthlessness with which I had banished all images of me as a mother. But as I was cleaning up after the party, the dress that I'd tossed to the floor kept reasserting itself in my vision, like the memory of an abandoned

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childhood friend. It was the kind of dress Stephanie Sullivan would have liked.

I would think of Stephanie often in the years that followed, as the Christian Right tried repeatedly to turn back the clock to 1954. While extremists screamed bloody murder at women's clinics and exposed people's private peccadilloes on CNN, I'd remember her kindness. And though I felt childishly vindicated when various holier-than-thous—Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Newt Gingrich—were defrocked and exposed, sometimes I missed that brief moment in history when people wore their politics and morals literally on their sleeves. Our culture wars have persisted, but what bizarro world uniforms would we wear to a Come As You Are Not party in the post–Cold War homogenization of our current decade, when the difference between thy neighbor and thyself is not so transparent? I would not be surprised if Stephanie and I, reunited at a high school reunion, discovered we had the same hairdo again: shoulder-length and highlighted, and layered on the sides like Monica Lewinsky's.

Which brings me back to my first neighbor, my astrological twin, that girl who was born to a teen out of wedlock in an era when all mothers were supposedly content roasting meats in their matrimonial kitchens. Did she get pregnant at the wrong time? Or did she spend a lifetime trying to prove she was nothing like her mother? Either way, she and I would have something in common.

The last I heard, Stephanie was the happily married mother of three.

Although I have raised two boys—the sons of the man I finally married (after a decade of living together in sin)—I never did put my Lamaze training to use in childbirth, for myself or for any neighbor, not even Vicki. When she finally went into labor, during the weekend I moved out, the baby was breech. By the light of the full moon, she and Glenn took an ambulance to the hospital. I don't know which was the bigger irony—that I used my breathing lessons only during my abortion, or that Vicki, who thought western medicine was the work of the devil, had to get a cesarean. Since no one but the midwife and the father stand-in was permitted in the operating room, I went home.

I heard from a friend of another neighbor that Vicki kicked Glenn out a few years later when his unemployment ran out, and that she was raising her daughter alone. That daughter must be old enough by now to be a college senior, old enough to be deciding on a career. Her mom was convinced that her child was a wise old soul who was sent down to heal America. Let's hope, for all our sakes, that she was right.

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Selling the Old Piano

JEANNE EMMONS

It cost me $150 then,
twenty-five years ago, and I was a woman
of means. At midnight in my low-rent apartment,
I kept company with all that mahogany
polished to a hard shine. Those carved vines
luxuriating beneath the sheet music,
those shapely legs, upright—lathed, fluted,
and scrolled, staunch as Doric columns.
The chipped ivory keys had a grain like wood
to prove that they had once been alive.

The old instrument wore its history plainly—
that conical gouge, for instance, where some child
made to practice too long must have taken
an awl to it, watching the yellow shavings
spiral onto the rug. But I played willingly
and for the love of it, singing all those *Lieder,*
laying the notes down from side to side like a brick mason.

With so many hammers I constructed
Schumann nightly. The piano bore it all,
marriage and the children napping under
a thatch of Brahms, soft-pedaled and slow,
and the first little kiosks of songs,
one-a-penny, two-a-penny, Hot Cross Buns.
The brass damper pedal shone with the rub
of Sunday shoe-soles, skinny legs stretching
to smooth the rough edges of *Für Elise.*

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My children have surpassed me now completely
on such high scaffoldings of Rachmaninoff and Bach,
the console shakes with their scaling. They have outgrown
the piano, now a century old or more.
I have sold it for $150.
It has not appreciated, but the ivory's patina
has absorbed a portion of my life's currency.

It is worth the same as before, I say.
It is worth the same. It rolls away from me
on a dolly down the front walk into a van,
like a stroke victim into an ambulance.
Here is the new one. Its varnished ebony
reflects my hands, stone lions couchant
on the flat steps. Where are the arpeggios
that used to rise from my windpipe like a second spine?
Memory is leaning hard on the damper.
The old strings tremble in me, faster and faster,
like the invisible wings of bumblebees.

Jeanne Emmons teaches English at Briar Cliff College and is the poetry editor of the *Briar Cliff Review*. She is the author of *Rootbound*, a book of poetry. Her work has appeared recently in the *Cimarron Review*, the *Prairie Schooner*, and other journals.

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Rattlesnake Country

MELVIN WILK

for Todd Lieber

Tombs in a wilderness valley, thousands of tombs with crosses
on graves from all the wars since Custer's wipeout.
On the battle ridge the scope is epic:
Chanting of war and death songs, wailing of the 7th Cavalry trumpets,
blending brooding notes in the wind.
In numb uniformity, the white stones reduce
each soldier to nothing in particular.
The stones, bright as baby teeth, bite through the crew-cut grass.
The National Park Service handout warns: "Remember, you are in
rattlesnake country."

A Black couple in churchy clothes
strolls among the gravestones reading inscriptions.
Over a mass grave, the names of Custer's men tower in granite,
including the only Black who fell here, Isaiah.
Isaiah. No surname. No clue. Something is blurred.
Does the ranger know how many African Americans are buried here?
"We make no racial distinctions at our National Cemeteries.
Besides, color doesn't matter!"

Whose color doesn't matter?
In colorblind, rattlesnake country,
nothing reveals the debt to the ever-exposed,
so visible in life, so thoroughly hidden here
below Custer's ridge.
Under light-years of sky,
our Brothers and Sisters wait:
interred, integrated, effaced.

Melvin Wilk, Professor of English at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa, is the author of *In Exile*. He is working on a second collection of poems, *Marrying America*.

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Troping Through Proverbia

BERT O. STATES

Proverbia is a land of laws and regulations based on the wisdom of its forefathers, so much so that the speech of Proverbians is strangely ornamented with their matter and in conversation the Proverbians often seem to be practicing law rather than life. As a result, there are so many interpretations and variants of the laws that if one is not to your liking, you can generally find another that is, and it will frequently conflict with other laws bearing on the same conduct and behavior.

—Traveler's Guide to Mythical Lands

Proverbia is a country most of us visit more frequently than we realize. What we bring home from it each time is a compact nugget of usage called a proverb, which has the remarkable power of justifying anything we may wish to undertake ourselves or anything we may wish to forgive or condemn in others. Proverbs, our mythical guide tells us, are "strangely ornamented" sayings, which rise in our speech like the caps of waves breaking on the shore of conversation. I take that back. Most proverbs sneak into speech like foxes into the hen house. Ada and Ida are talking, and Ada says something like, "Well, if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well" or "We should let bygones be bygones," and Ida says (in either case), "Oh, that's so true, and we should practice what we preach." Neither will notice how the drift of meaning has suddenly been condensed into a molecule of philosophy born long before either of them. In a flash, a whole world slips into speech through a narrow opening—the world of received wisdom, which, it turns out, is really a world of contradictions.

Proverbs are a sort of instant wisdom, an endorphin for all occasions. Normally, proverbs are metaphorical, on two counts: they contain both a

Bert O. States, Professor of Dramatic Art Emeritus at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is the author of *Seeing in the Dark: Reflections on Dreams and Dreaming*, among other books. His most recent contribution to the SCHOLAR was "Of Paradoxes and Tautologies" (Winter 1998).

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figurative and a literal level of meaning, and they are models of verbal economy. As Walker Percy puts it in my favorite definition of metaphor, a metaphor is "a big thing happening in a small place." And "a proverb," as one of them runs, "is shorter than a bird's beak," and of course it is the beak—or the brevity—that enables the proverb to hit the mark, just as it enables the early bird to catch the worm. Proverbs belong to the literature of wisdom, and insofar as they are figurations ("A stitch in time saves nine," "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush"), they usually stand in relation to that wisdom as explicit example to implicit precept. This is easy enough to see in the two proverbs above, which simply ask you to make a generalization from sewing and bird catching to analogous situations in daily life in which timeliness or possession are advisable. But it is not always that simple. For example, proverbs like "The eye is bigger than the belly" and "Two heads are better than one" introduce an inverted variation on the straight figurative proverb. That is, they are outright falsehoods taken on the literal level, but are understood to be true if you take "eye" and "belly" as figures for "appetite," and "heads" as meaning "minds" or "persons," rather than body organs. And what leads you to do this is that the falsehood makes no sense unless you bump it up another level in the associative process. Moreover, many proverbs are not figurative at all, but simply state a precept without offering an example or an illustration ("Generosity is its own reward," "First things first," "Knowledge is power"). In either case, the appeal of a proverb depends on the authority of wisdom unleashed, as Percy says, "in a small place," which is to say, in as few words as possible. Like rolling stones, proverbs gather no moss.

Still, one could claim that all proverbs are metaphors, whether they actually contain a metaphor or not; that is, they are a way of carrying old moral or behavioral processes into some new situation or set of facts, as one would speak in a time of loss or penury the maxims of patience or endurance coined for other situations. Normally one would also find a strong "poetic" metaphor, something borrowed from the household or field, to drive the parallel firmly home. But either way, the proverb functions more like a scientific analogy than like a poetic figure of speech, working much as the formula πr^2 works in finding the circumference of any circle anywhere in the world.

To put it another way, poetic metaphor is usually concerned with theme rather than thesis, reflection or recognition rather than practical action or behavior; and when a character in a play speaks a proverb, you can never be sure that the author is endorsing it as good advice for people outside the play or even for the character who speaks it. For example, Troilus defends the keeping of Helen in Troy by citing such proverbs as "What is aught but as 'tis valued?" and "We turn not back the silks upon the merchant, when we have spoil'd them." Shakespeare may have personally "believed" in these proverbs (on some occasions), but in

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the play (given his portrait of Helen and his "lecherous" view of war) his sympathies are probably closer to those of Hector, who is more a realist than a chivalric moralist. Poetic metaphor enjoys the correspondence, because it is true, expressive, and apt; whereas the business of the *proverbial* metaphor, and by extension all proverbs (whether they contain metaphors or not), is continually to demonstrate that what was good for yesteryear's geese is equally good for today's young ganders.

One of the differences between straight metaphors and proverbs is that metaphors are more striking for their originality and freshness; they make us work a little harder, and this seems to be a more pleasant experience than being told exactly what to think. When metaphors die—that is, pass from their literary homes in poems and books into the public domain (the process called lexicalization)—they become idioms: idiom being what we know so well that we see straight through it, as in Shakespeare's "Not a mouse stirring." Indeed, as Francis Sparshott has put it, "a language is nothing but a necropolis of dead metaphors." Or, as Stanislaw Lec, another aphorist, put it, "In the beginning there was the Word—at the end just the Cliché."

Proverbs, on the other hand, are never original but more often than not have been passed down, like jokes, from unknown sources. "A proverb," as a famous one goes, "is the wit of one and the wisdom of many." But one might take issue with this proverb, or with half of it, anyway. We can easily grant the point that a proverb is the "wit of one" when we have direct evidence of its source. But most of the time, I'll wager, a proverb is no more the work of one "wit" than a cow path is the work of one cow. Surely many proverbs must come about by stages. That is, a proverb doesn't begin life as a *proverb* (with someone standing on a rock and saying, "Hear hear, I'm about to make a proverb!") but as a response to a recurring situation. For example, there is a good possibility that "A stitch in time saves nine" came from one or more housewives in one or more places who noticed, one or more times, that less work is involved if you patch the elbow of a coat or sweater when the hole is still small. Certainly no argument here. And if the situation comes up frequently, it will undoubtedly provoke language ("John, let me stitch that snag before it gets bigger"), and language used as a response to a recurring situation will itself become recurrent, as all married people know. The response is not yet a proverb, but it is on its way to becoming one when it achieves the economy that comes with repetition and, somewhere along the line, perhaps, the added spice of a sharp parallel structure capped by rhyme. Such "improvements" are retained and passed on in ever widening distribution, perhaps in different forms in different locales, and at length the response settles into language as a proverb that can be applied to situations that have nothing to do with stitching elbows but a good deal to do with nipping lots of things in the bud.

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The proverb form is as versatile as any other literary or cultural form, and can even be adapted to include new forms of wisdom. For instance, there is a species we might refer to as original or ironic proverbs, utterances that sound like proverbs but are inversions of typical proverbial wisdom ("He who hesitates is probably right," "Two wrongs are only the beginning," "One good turn gets most of the blanket"). There are also satirical applications of the proverb principle to "new" situations ("The hardness of the butter is proportional to the softness of the bread," "To succeed in politics it is often necessary to rise above your principles," "The sooner you fall behind, the more time you have to catch up"). These examples, incidentally, are from my e-mail joke service, and I apologize for the theft. I am somewhat heartened, however, by the likelihood that they were collected from unidentified sources and thus are, like all proverbs, common property (as one of the entries tells us, "To steal from one person is plagiarism, to steal from many is research").

Proverbs always seem to be looking for metaphors that try to squeeze or reduce large emotional stirrings or forms of behavior, virtue, or human folly into small objects or creatures that you might find around the house or barnyard ("Silence catches a mouse," "Curiosity killed the cat," "The devil is in the dice," "At length the fox is brought to the furrier"). In all of these a homely figure is set against the intangible ground of a behavioral abstraction (silence, curiosity, evil). These seem to be persuasive ("Common proverb seldom lies") because the very detection of a correspondence between two things, as so many experiments in cognitive psychology have shown, is an influential factor in the formation of our attitudes about those things. One thing rubs off on another, as when you rub two sticks together with sufficient agitation the result is fire, or enlightenment. Proverbs, however, are not intended to enlighten as much as they are intended to light the way toward the right course or to justify what one would have done anyway, as when the conqueror who is about to take a city finds a proverbial way to see his action as God's will or manifest destiny rather than the result of his own ambition.

The real virtue of the economy of proverbs, however, is not to be found in the form and figuration of the proverb itself, but in what we might call the foveal, or focused, energy of proverbs as an extreme perspective on experience. That is, of all literary forms, proverbs most lack the dimension of peripheral vision, by which I mean the tendency to see all things as posed against other things. Literature—certainly not in all its forms—has a good deal of peripheral vision because it is (at its best, anyway) a delineation of the possible, not of the right or the wrong. This can be simply illustrated by turning again to Troilus's proverb "What is aught but as 'tis valu'd." Taken from the play and put in a *Book of Proverbs* under, say, WEALTH, alongside such variants as "Money isn't everything," it becomes a received truth—moreover, one that does not change with

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time, because it is itself a conclusion made about time. In the play, however, it is poised against alternative recommendations, so we are forced to take it in a relative way. The consequence of this is that the play—even though it is the most vociferously cynical play in all of Shakespeare—achieves a kind of openness. You can interpret it almost any way you like, by virtue of its containing opposite kinds of advice and conviction. There is an even more famous case of this in *King Lear*, in which we find one character (Gloucester) saying, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport," and another character (Edgar) saying, "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices, make instruments to plague us." In short, a head-on contradiction. You can probably read the whole play from either point of view, as you wish, but it makes more sense to think that Shakespeare was simply telling us that human disasters are caused by conflicting beliefs. We might say that such works are evasive, in the sense that metaphor is evasive, or, if you will, that they are ironic, in the sense that they create a context composed of opposing views. What is open about the proverb, on the other hand, is not its possible meanings, or interpretations, but the unlimited range of its possible application to any experience that can be cut to its pattern.

The truth is that, as almost all its scholars have noted, a book of proverbs is a shameless repository of contradictions. If you read it straight through looking for advice on how to live your life, as you might Dale Carnegie or the Bible, you would be hopelessly confused before you got through the "A"s. What conclusion would you reach: "Easy come, easy go" or "Waste not, want not"? "Dumb men get no lands" or "Talk is talk; but 'tis money buys land"? "In trust is truth" or "In trust is treason"? "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" or "Out of sight, out of mind"? Luckily, there are no proverbs urging murder, adultery, sloth, avarice, or wrath as antidotes to goodness, chastity, industry, generosity, and forgiveness. And it would be hard to imagine a proverb like "Where virtue is, vice follows," or "More is better," simply because it would be hard to imagine a sector of the world where these values are held. In other words, such positions do not require ironic redress, because they defeat themselves in their own perverse advertisement. Still, there is ample room in Proverbia for cynicism as an antidote to optimism ("The world is full of knaves," "Ill weeds grow apace," "A bad penny always turns up," "There is a scorpion under every stone"). The logic behind such inclusiveness, however, is itself ironic, because, taken as a whole, a book of proverbs, constituted thus of opposites, forms as it were the master drama of human relations, in which "Nothing is certain but uncertainty itself." But out of this uncertainty arises a certainty of a different kind, necessarily ironic, since it requires that all individual proverbs be considered as neither true nor false but *contributory to a total vision*. Thus it turns out that contradiction isn't the product of conflicting proverbs; contra-

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diction is a product of human experience, in which conflict is inevitable and resilience indispensable. A book of proverbs is like a pharmacy where all varieties of medicine are stored. But medicines that serve as cures for one disease might kill if taken for another. So a book of proverbs is, in Kenneth Burke's term, a rhetoric of motives, and this is the respect in which it literally contains, in small, the plot of every imaginable novel or fiction.

As we have seen with Troilus, proverbs fit snugly into literature, particularly the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. You will find lots of Shakespeare in proverb books and even more proverbs in Shakespeare. Yet Shakespeare's world is "proverbial" not simply in the number of proverbs his people speak but in the quality of life in it. Everywhere we find a predisposition toward what Foucault calls *taxonomia,* or "an algebra of complex representations," in which one continually hears "the insistent murmur of resemblance." As a generous example let us look at Polonius's advice to Laertes, in *Hamlet.* It is well known that Shakespeare is leaning on the traditional practice of fathers giving advice to departing sons, and the sense of every one of Polonius's precepts can be found in standard proverb collections. But there is something different about the "algebra" of representation, and it takes us to the salient distinction between proverbs and literary tropes as forms of expression. For example, Polonius's "Give thy thoughts no tongue" sounds like a proverb and might even pass as one, but when you come to the second half of the utterance ("Nor any unproportion'd thought his act"), something unproverbial happens; it is probably best referred to as the emergence of *embellishment,* or the making of a distinction between speaking your mind, on the one hand, and doing something only rashly thought out, on the other. In a literary work, such embellishments are part of our expectation, but for proverbial purposes we need two proverbs rather than one to express this distinction.

Elsewhere in Polonius's speech we come closer to pure proverb: "Give every man thy ear but few thy voice," "Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy," "Apparel oft proclaims the man," and "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." And you will find variations on all of these in the proverb books. But even here we have taken the sayings out of a context that is not only thick in embellishment but marked, overall, by the performance of an artist (Shakespeare) who is using proverbial wisdom to a mimetic end. Something else is being done with proverbs, and the something else is the illustration of a human being (Polonius) caught in the "unproportion'd" act of making proverbs. Moreover, Shakespeare's text is rich in figurative language that impresses us not only for its moral sense but for its portraiture of worldly diversity. The speech yields a great canvas of human behavior, like Jaques's seven ages of man speech in *As You Like It,* and when we arrive finally at

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> This above all: to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow as the night the day
> Thou canst not then be false to any man

we pass from proverb to something closer to moral philosophy. By indirection we are reminded that one of the central characteristics of proverbs, as of folk literature at large, is the absence of character in the speaking voice—not certainly in the Aristotelian sense of character as ethos, or ethical truth, but in the sense of an individualized speaker to whom we can assign psychological traits, such as Polonius's garrulousness, pomposity, addiction to proverbial wisdom, and genuine concern for his son's welfare. In other words, proverbs travel light and cannot afford the divergencies of poetry.

Finally, there is the question of how proverbs suffer their life in time. What seems to happen is that proverbs, like metaphors, pass into the world of idiom, because their figurative aspect becomes transparent from overuse, somewhat like the passage of Chinese pictographs into less graphically descriptive characters. Some examples of proverbs that have "degenerated" into idiom-like expressions might be "Still waters run deep," "The walls have ears," "Let sleeping dogs lie," "Look before you leap," "Little pitchers have big ears," and so on. These are idiomatic in that you no longer "see" what you're saying or hearing, just as you don't "see" parts of human anatomy when you speak of elbow room, the leg of a table, the foot of the stairs, or the head of the class. In short, the gap between figurative and literal meaning has disappeared and we are left with the unobtrusive shell of a usage that once had a true metaphorical status, as "leg" did when it was first applied to "table." One might call them "dead proverbs," I suppose, but I suspect that the graphic life of a proverb is rather short, in any case, and that its active life is a direct function of its application to fresh (but of course timeless) situations, of which there are always plenty. One would assume that proverbs, like slang, have a period of use in which the vehicle itself is "catchy" insofar as it can be applied to different tenors, or situations. But after a while the catchiness wears thin and the power of the utterance shifts to its idiographic or "reminder" value. How many times could you hear "the early bird gets the worm" and still see birds or worms in your mind's eye? But you would still know precisely what was meant. In other words, your understanding of the utterance would be automatic, assuming you are a native of the culture.

On the other hand, metaphors in literary works are hermetically contained by the virtual space of the work itself. The famous joke about the rube who tried to save Desdemona's life at a performance of *Othello* is a "proverbial" way of illustrating fiction's independence from the real

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world and the timelessness of its own world. Metaphor in fiction has a virtually eternal life, thanks to, among other things, the fact that for pragmatic purposes most fiction is almost useless. There is the other story, of course, about the lady who disliked *Hamlet* because it contained so many clichés, but again that is a joke about the lady's getting confused over the difference between literature and culture. There are no clichés or dead metaphors in Shakespeare, but many of his metaphors have died when they were carted outside and put to uses for which they were not intended. Figurative language in Shakespeare, and in literature at large, is always at the service of a complex context that involves character, plot, vision, sound, balance, antithesis, climax, and, above all, the intrinsic relation of the parts to each other and to the whole—in short, to a complete virtual world that has only an analogical relation to our own. The proverb, on the other hand, is a kind of free agent, with no obligation to a virtual home. It grows out of the same bustling world of manners and morals as literary fictions, but its business is far more urgent: to supply that world with ongoing proof that essentials never change, that history eternally repeats itself, and that every proverb in the book is true until the end of time. And time, as another proverb tells us, "devours all things"—including, presumably, all proverbs.

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A House in Bali

JAMIE JAMES

Over the past few years I've been spending more and more of my time in Indonesia: I like the way they do things here. After twenty-odd years of being in a hurry in New York City, I find no pleasure greater than to wake up in the morning and think to myself, "There is nothing I must do today." In Indonesia, people do a lot of nothing, which I have found enormously conducive to getting things done—to doing something because one wants to, because it's worth doing, not because it must be done. In New York, it got to the point where there wasn't enough time in the day even to stay behind, and the price of putting foie gras on the table, tallied from restaurant receipts amounting to twice the amount of my mortgage payments, had become shocking.

So last year I took a lease on a house in Bali. It's not fancy, but it's roomy and comfortable and well stocked with charming fake antiques, a major industry around here. The main reason I chose the house was the garden, which occupies half of my not-quite-an-acre, enclosed by a high brick wall. I have four tall, ancient coconut palms, one of which soars to at least seventy feet, the others not quite as high. I have papaya, banana, and lime trees, ginger, hibiscus, bird-of-paradise, bougainvillea, and other ornamental shrubs I know only by their Indonesian names; most likely they don't have English names.

In Bali, most gardens aren't designed. The only rule is that you must have a crimson sealing-wax palm at the entrance; red is an auspicious, welcoming color. After the builders finished this house, they took whatever plants they had lying around or could buy cheaply and stuck them in

Jamie James, a critic and travel writer based in New York and Indonesia, is a frequent contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly* and other periodicals. His essay "My Faulkner" appeared in the SCHOLAR's Summer 1999 issue. *Andrew and Joey*, a novel set in Bali, is forthcoming from Kensington Books.

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the mud; the results, ten years later, are delightful. There's a thatched pavilion in one corner, for postprandial naps, and a little waterfall in the opposite corner. When Rendy, my Indonesian friend, and I moved in, there was a murky pool full of mud and weeds at the foot of the waterfall. The gardener who came with the house was a short, skinny Javanese lad named Agus, no more than eighteen years old. His first job, I told him, was to clear up the mud pool. He rolled up his trouser legs, picked up his little spade, and jumped in. He carried away bucketful after bucketful of black mud. When he got close to the bottom, he called me over excitedly; there were about two dozen goldfish and a big whiskered catfish flipping around in the muck. Agus cleaned it up and filled it with fresh water, and the fishes swam around in triumphant circles for days.

Houses here aren't really designed, either. I've seen hundreds of buildings go up over the course of the year, and I've never seen anyone use a plan. Start the wall here, go down to the palm tree, and turn left: Indonesians prefer to build around the landscape, rather than to landscape around the building. One of the most beautiful trees in my garden, called a buni, has glossy leaves and clusters of glaucous red and black berries that stain the brick walkway and the soles of our sandals. It reclines with tropical languor at a forty-five-degree angle, its trunk branching into a thick vine that winds sinuously across almost the entire length of the garden before it finally descends into the earth. The front line of the house, the edge of a wide tiled porch, was determined by the position of the buni tree's root. In order to make a bit more room for the porch, the builders cut a strange little jigsaw-puzzle piece out of it to accommodate the last coil of the buni, and filled it with sand. That's where we put the barbecue.

As I said, I like the way they do things here. Americans are always talking about their freedoms, but in fact they have more nannyish rules governing their daily life than any country I know except Sweden. Indonesians simply don't grasp concepts such as smoke-free zones and seat belt laws. Here, it sometimes seems as if there are no rules; there's little point in making them, because people don't pay any attention to them. Indonesian airports do have smoke-free zones, but there are always people smoking in them, especially policemen. Here, as Mrs. Campbell said, you can do whatever you like so long as you don't do it in the street and frighten the horses.

I've discovered some customs here that I recall from my childhood in Texas, customs that have long since vanished from American life—credit, for example. I don't mean mortgages and Visa cards, I'm talking about the woman who sits under a mango tree down the street with a box full of fish fresh from this morning's market, who will give me as much fish and squid as I want, and if I don't have enough money, she says, "Pay me tomorrow," licks the tip of her pencil, and writes it down on her pad.

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Neighborliness. I live next door to a little slum, a seven-room house where thirty-odd employees of my landlord live. There's a steady flow of food and fruit back and forth between us. If we have a birthday party here, the children next door must be taken into account when ordering the cake, and the plate comes back to us a few days later filled with banana fritters or whatever else they had for breakfast. Now we're in the throes of the papaya season, which means that I have twenty pounds of perfect fruit on hand. Indonesians are passionate believers in the precept "waste not, want not," so one of our principal problems at the moment is what to do with all the papaya: you can eat only so much, and everyone else is trying to give away his own. I'm not saying that Americans aren't neighborly, but in New York that means saying hello to the other folks on the elevator, perhaps helping to carry a heavy bag. Here, it's the way it was when I was a child in suburban Houston, where there was a continuous exchange of casseroles and homemade jam up and down the street.

Servants. My parents never had servants, but they did have a cleaning lady, Esther, who came once a week to scrub, do the ironing, and cook a big pot of black-eyed peas or collard greens. I did have some rich schoolmates whose families had real maids, who wore uniforms and came to the door when you rang the doorbell, just like in the movies. Now even the millionaires I know in America don't have servants. They may have illegal aliens or aspiring actors come to scrub the toilets, and hire caterers and waiters when they entertain, but they don't have full-time servants. I have two, a maid and a gardener. Here, I am Tuan. It means, literally, *lord.* Conrad's original title was *Tuan Jim.* That doesn't mean that I'm the lord of the house—no one here pays much attention to anything I say—but rather that everything is done for me. The ideal tuan does nothing, and never needs to ask to have anything done. Meals are served, the house is cleaned, laundry appears clean and pressed in the closet, the garden is all in order.

My current gardener's name is Pito. He's nineteen years old, and a working fool. He's been with us for six months, and he's never caused any problems. His job before we hired him was to baby-sit the children at the little slum, so gardening—and eating fish every day—was a great opportunity for him. Our trouble is with the maids, who are always either getting pregnant or being called home to care for allegedly dying fathers. The maid at the moment is called Nyoman. She's the fifth in her line, and the last. Rendy recently discovered that she has been chiseling the grocery funds; if the lease weren't about to expire and the household closed, she would be sent on her way.

Not that I really blame her for chiseling. Servants here are like serfs: I pay Nyoman and Pito each thirty-three dollars a month and provide them with tiny rooms, good food, and toiletries. If they get sick, I pay the doctor's bill. Sometimes we buy them clothes. I know it's a much better

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life for them than most jobs would support; if Pito didn't work as my gardener, he would probably end up shoveling gravel and unloading rocks ten hours a day for the incessant building that goes on here, and not make enough money to eat fish more than once or twice a week. Yet it still feels strange. I grew up in a middle-class suburb in the United States and went to a public high school and a liberal-arts college. None of that prepared me for the lofty privileges and onerous responsibilities of tuanhood. I'm fortunate to be sharing the house with an Indonesian: I let Rendy make all the decisions, and I acquiesce in them with a tuanly wave of the hand.

Our favorite maid was the first one, Sri, a vivid, lusty woman from East Java whose sister had served as Rendy's maid in Jakarta a few years ago. She was thirty-five and had just married her second husband, Mul, who was about ten years younger. (He was supposed to be the gardener, taking Agus's place, but unless he was given specific instructions, all he ever did in the garden was hide and smoke cigarettes.) Sri had a silvery giggle, talked loudly and a lot, and always sang when she cooked. All our friends loved her, and they often turned up at dusk, for she was a superb cook.

However, Sri's life was a soap opera. Soon after her arrival, it became obvious that she was a few months pregnant. When Rendy asked her about it, she told him that she had married Mul as soon as she realized she was pregnant and had left her village immediately to come work for us. She explained that she had to leave her village because she had a fourteen-year-old daughter by her first husband, and what kind of an example would that set, if the daughter found out that her mother had conceived out of wedlock? After she got too pregnant to work, Sri said, she and Mul would go to his village, far from Sri's own, and have the baby there. A few months later she could go home and say she had just given birth, making the child "legitimate." I asked her if she really thought she could pass off a three–month-old baby as a newborn? Surely her daughter would see through that. Sri giggled and said, "Tuan, she must believe me. I am her mother."

I wanted to give her a cash bonus when she left, but at Rendy's insistence, we bought some baby stuff instead, to make sure that loutish Mul didn't take the money from her and buy a motorcycle. I still don't understand why we can't pay the servants a decent wage. When I suggested giving Pito a raise, Rendy vetoed the idea. He said, "If he has more money, he'll start smoking. He's too young." For Rendy that sort of paternalistic thinking is instinctive. He told me that when he was a child, his father was the head man in his village in Celebes, and the other villagers kowtowed when they came to his house—knees and elbows on the floor, head down.

I said I like the way they do things here, but that certainly doesn't

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mean that I understand why they do them that way. Every day I see something happening that appears to me to be completely senseless, and often my Indonesian friends can't explain it. Here's an example: Many of the roads in Bali are terrible, but Jalan Basangkasa, the thoroughfare that runs near my house, was in good shape when we moved in. One day a truckload of workers arrived, closed down the street, and methodically began to cut and remove squares of asphalt, as though they were serving pavement brownies, which they stacked on the bed of their truck. This went on for weeks, until Jalan Basangkasa was as rough as any washed-out country lane.

A month later, the workers returned—to fill in all the little asphalt canyons they had created. When they were done, it was just another lumpy Indonesian street. Why? None of my Indonesian friends could explain it to me. They didn't understand why I took such an interest in the matter; they're accustomed to the government doing inexplicable things. I suppose in the United States we have the Navy paying two thousand dollars for toilet handles and screwdrivers—the sort of scandals the newspapers are always digging up. I can understand that: it's just greed, with the connivance of incompetence. But I cannot conceive of what reason, what cause, could lie behind Bali's Sisyphean method of road paving. I've concluded that there is no reason. I'm convinced that the island's director of public works had a dream in which the deity presiding over Jalan Basangkasa told him to cut out little squares of asphalt and then fill them back in.

Part of the pleasure of living here is being exotic oneself: the Balinese don't understand me any better than I do them. Bali today is a cosmopolitan place: indeed, in high season the island is overrun with stout, sunburned foreigners wearing too much jewelry and not nearly enough clothes. Yet to the Balinese they are just a blur, a human stream that flows past, leaving vast sums of money behind. As a resident, however, I must be reckoned with. The Indonesians assume, correctly, that I will never understand their ways: for every one thing I manage to get right, I goof twice. Yet I have gained a reputation for being something of an *Information Please Almanac.* The government of General Suharto, which was deposed in 1998, made it a policy to keep the people uneducated. Pito is always puzzling over my old copies of the *International Herald Tribune,* trying to find out about the world. I invite him to ask me about anything he doesn't understand, which is almost everything: What is the religion in Egypt? Is Vietnam a democracy? Who is George Washington? Teaching the servants a smattering of basic knowledge isn't one of a tuan's traditional duties, yet it feels like a useful thing to do.

Never was Tuan a greater source of wonderment than the time he made buniberry jelly. The servants hate to see me do anything resembling

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work, so I never have a chance to cook—whenever I try, the maid stands five feet away, holding a spoon, with a pleading look in her eyes. But one day a few weeks ago, I saw Nyoman eating the berries from the buni tree. She offered me one, and it was delicious, like a black currant, but more piquant, almost like a blackberry. I immediately thought, with its deep purple color, it would be perfect for jelly (the seeds are too big for jam). I found some pectin at a fancy grocery that caters to expatriates and got a recipe by e-mail from my father. We started picking berries.

I had never made jelly before, even though I come from a long line of distinguished jam, jelly, and relish makers, and I thought: *It's only jelly.* How hard can it be? I waited till Rendy was out of the house on business, and gave strict orders to the servants to stay out of the kitchen while I was cooking; of course, they stood in the doorway staring at me. Measure everything out in advance, sterilize the jars, stir the pectin into the juice . . . wait a minute, it didn't say anything in the recipe about the pectin forming huge gelatinous blobs that refused to be stirred in. Furiously I scooped up the recalcitrant pectin blobs and squished them through a sieve. "Stir continuously." How does one squish pectin blobs through a sieve and stir at the same time? Who do they think I am, Vishnu? I knew there were arms lurking in the doorway that ached to help, but I had been so insistent about the servants staying out of the kitchen, I could say nothing. If there's anything worse than a working tuan, it's a changeable tuan.

I finally managed to get most of the big blobs squished through the sieve, pausing every ten seconds or so to stir. "Add the sugar and bring to second boil." I kept up with the squishing, forming a steely resolution not to have anything to do with pectin ever again. "When the mixture returns to a second rolling boil, let boil for one minute exactly, stirring continuously, then remove from heat." I had remembered to wear my fancy watch with the tiny dial for the seconds, but with my galloping presbyopia, I could barely find the dial, let alone see the hand, which was the size of a termite's antenna. Where are my glasses? That looks like a second boil. Damn! I resorted to the only expedient I knew: "One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi . . . " as they taught us in school. I was sweating furiously, and mopping my brow with the sleeve of my shirt, feeling very much like the hapless do-it-yourselfer in an old television commercial.

In the doorway, the servants were gaping with amazement The jelly turned out all right, but that was the beginning and the end of my career in jelly making. I don't have the nerves for it.

Nonetheless, I took great satisfaction in creating something delicious using what would otherwise be trash for Pito to sweep up. We have never run out of limes: the tree in the garden always has at least one or two, sometimes a dozen, tangy limes. Bali is incomparably fertile. My childhood memories of gardening in Texas are mostly of my parents' stressful, never-ending struggle to protect fragile plants from the destructive forces

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of nature: deadly insects, rot, hurricanes, hailstones, droughts, early freezes, late freezes. Here, Pito's principal job is to reduce the quantity of plant life. He spends hours every day chopping away at the trees and shrubs, mowing the grass and pulling up weeds, carrying the boughs and stalks and fronds off by the bushel. If it were left untended, the garden would go to jungle in a matter of weeks.

My house in Bali teems with animal life, a pocket Noah's ark. In addition to the fish, we have feral cats, bats, rice rats, squirrels, songbirds (caged and uncaged), all sorts of lizards, cobras, and a parallel universe of spiders and flying, creeping, and boring insects. When we first moved here, a mongoose was preying on the neighborhood. I liked him—remembering Rikki-tikki-tavi, I was hopeful that he would keep the cobras in line—but everyone else was afraid of him. We heard him, thumping across the roof in pursuit of his prey, more than we saw him, but I did catch a few glimpses: he was a husky, very imposing mongoose with a bushy tail. He killed three of our birds, bashing in the bamboo cages and devouring his victims whole. A few months later he was gone; perhaps one of the neighbors succeeded in killing him. One night a hideous swarm of termites swept through the house, ruining dinner and littering the house with their revolting cast-off wings. This morning I saw about a hundred tadpoles in the fish pond; soon we'll be overrun with frogs. I sympathize with Pharaoh: What plague is next?

In New York, my married friends agonize over whether to have a second child. Here, people are always having babies. Half the population of the little slum is under twelve. School makes minimal demands on their time, so a lot of playing goes on in the dusty, weedy little plot in front of their house. The children look upon my garden as a place of enchantment. Sometimes, when the gate is left open, they dare each other to dart inside and run through the grass, until Pito shoos them away. In the beginning of my tenancy, I felt bad about this state of affairs—shouldn't all children have a chance to run barefoot in the grass?—so I proposed that we let the children come play in the garden once in a while. Rendy and the servants dismissed this idea as utter madness, as they do with most of my suggestions about the way things should be done.

There is another side to the fecundity of a tropical island: the value of life here is greatly discounted, compared with the Western way of thinking. The Balinese drive their cars with a demoniacal fury exceeded only by the cavalier derring-do of the island's motorcyclists. One evening I was driving to a dinner party, speeding along Bali's only freeway. Everyone was doing about sixty miles per hour and, as usual, paying no attention to those ornamental white stripes painted on the pavement—and there, twenty feet in front of me, in the middle of the road, was an old man weaving along on a rickety bicycle. I stood on the brake, narrowly avoid-

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ing killing the man and being rear-ended. I was shaking so badly I had to pull off the road for a minute to collect myself.

When I arrived at the party, my host, an Austrian man who is married to a Balinese woman and has lived here for more than twenty years, told me earnestly, "If something like that happens again, and you hit the old man, whatever you do, don't stop." I didn't understand. What about the old man? "Someone will stop and help him. But if the people saw that you, a foreigner, had hit a Balinese man, they would certainly kill you." He was serious, and he wasn't exaggerating.

Another example: When I first moved here, I had a dog problem—a crippled, ancient cur who howled and moaned outside our bedroom window all night long. It belonged to my neighbor on the other side of the house from the little slum, an old woman who eked out a livelihood collecting firewood. When I talked to her, she said she couldn't sleep either, but what could she do? Obviously there was a ghost in the alley between our houses. When I asked my landlord for advice, he said, "Have your servant kill the dog." Everyone I consulted agreed with him—just kill it. The dog solved the problem by dying. Whenever visitors to the island tell me how gentle and lovely the Balinese people are, I tell them those stories and invite them to a cockfight. Balinese Hinduism has an exquisite, complex conception of the universe, which it celebrates with rituals of solemn beauty. But in a religion based on the principle of reincarnation, a single life has less value than it does where I come from. That's not meant to imply that this value is insufficient. Indeed, living here has made me wonder whether perhaps in America we place too much value on an individual life. Our government dispenses million-dollar prophylactic heart-bypass operations like party favors; of course, when it is one's own father, one gratefully accepts it. But the cost of a single such operation would build a clinic here. Sri's prenatal care consisted of two visits to a doctor, who told her not to take any cold remedies and to eat more fish. When old people get sick here, unless they are rich, they just die.

A year is how long it takes to get to know a place. I may not understand everything that goes on in my little plot of Balinese ground, but I know it.

This morning is my last in the house. I'm looking out at my garden, and I find myself wondering whatever happened to those pretty little green birds, no more than three inches long, that fluttered around the palm trees when we first arrived a year ago. They say they have seasons here, rainy and dry, but for someone who grew up with Texas summers and endured New England winters in college, they're paltry excuses for seasons. Nothing here is cyclical. Plants just grow and grow and grow; fauna multiplies. Species come and go: Where are the little green birds?

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We had terrible clouds of mosquitoes this time last year; now there are few. Instead we have the Attack of the Giant Red Ants, the latest plague. We've always had tiny black ones, legions of them, but a few weeks ago I got an open can of tonic water the maid had saved in the refrigerator (waste not, want not), and poured fifty giant red ants, each as big as a joint of my thumb, into my gin. I'd never seen one before; now the kitchen teems with them.

It's the linear unchangingness of life here that is so hard to accept: tropical is tropical, and temperate is temperate, and never the twain shall meet. Of course, things here change at a hurtling pace. Old buildings are razed, and new ones raised in their places. Mosquitoes give way to termites, which are succeeded by giant red ants. But the underlying pace never varies. Life is always rushing forward, growing. In the temperate zone, we know that the frost will kill the rose blossoms, the frost will thaw, the roses will bloom again. Here, you plant some ginger in the garden, and a year later it's crowding out everything around it: Hack away, Pito.

It's the same with the social fabric. In America, we say that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer: and while statistics prove that's true, nonetheless a poor man, if he's shrewd, can still make his fortune. Here there's an impermeable wall between rich and poor. The reason we can't pay the servants a decent wage is that we're rich and they're poor. Pito and Nyoman don't kowtow, but nothing has really changed. Most of the American children I know have computers, but the kids next door can't play in the garden and are no more likely to be taught what the religion of Egypt is, or who George Washington was, than was Pito. I'm worried about him. Nyoman can take care of herself: she has a daughter she can persuade to take her in, and she was clever enough to chisel thousands from the grocery money before she got caught. But timid, uneducated, powerless Pito—what will happen to him? I don't dare talk to Rendy about this. Pito himself would be surprised if he knew that I was thinking about him. No one has ever thought much about him, except perhaps his mother, who sent him to Bali when he was grown. Like all tropical life, Pito will just keep going till he dies. I, creature of the temperate zone, will keep waiting for those pretty little green birds to come back.

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Edited by J. D. McClatchy

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THE UNCERTAIN ART

Mind, Body, and the Doctor

SHERWIN B. NULAND

It was known by every charlatan who sold bottles of foul-tasting green elixir from the back of a horse-drawn wagon; it was known by Anton Mesmer and all the other poseurs who invented one or another of the mystical therapies based on the gullibility of the afflicted and the merely nervous; it was known by high priests, shamans, and witch doctors; it was even known by Hippocrates, Galen, and the other founders of the supposedly nonsubjective Western medical tradition. I suspect that faith healers, homeopaths, and chiropractors, in their deepest self-reflective moments, admit it into their conscious thoughts. Why don't today's ultrasophisticated avatars of scientific medicine pay it the tribute it deserves? The authority of the physician is a powerful weapon against disease.

For millennia, that truth has been put into words in various ways. Its most direct statement, "He cures most successfully in whom the people have the most confidence," can be found in the works of Galen, the second-century Greek physician whose writings dominated medical thought from the Roman period until perhaps the seventeenth century. Galen's comment is frequently quoted (though always as if proclaiming a philosophical notion to be pondered, not as a possible therapeutic strategy). The Hippocratic literature had said much the same thing half a millennium earlier, emphasizing between the lines a patient's wish to please a doctor whom he admires: "Some patients, though conscious that their condition is perilous, recover their health simply through their contentment with the goodness of the physician."

The concept of pleasing is inherent in the so-called "placebo effect," nowadays much discussed by physicians of a humanistic bent, but deemed a confusing nuisance in the data-driven evaluation of drug efficacy insisted upon by our all-too-rational biomedical establishment. The word *placebo*—Latin for "I will please"—refers to a physician's inclination to prescribe for a needful patient even though he knows that the medication has no active ingredients. He thereby pleases the patient by fulfilling his expectation that something will be done. In turn, the patient pleases the doctor by recovering, thereby fulfilling *his* expectation that some good will come of the transaction.

There are trained physicians who poohpooh such therapeutic ventures as so much hocus-pocus, unworthy of their profession. Yet other physicians study the results of what might appear to be clinical legerdemain and report the most astonishing outcomes in people so treated. The frequency of beneficial effects of placebos ranges from approximately one in five to almost three in five, depending on the way the study is carried out and the criteria by which success is measured.

Yet those of us who have seen the power of the placebo effect must now contend with its recent statistical "debunking" by two researchers attached to the Department of Medical Philosophy and Clinical Theory at the University of Copenhagen (at least until other debunkers debunk the Danes). After millennia of what they dismiss as mere "anecdotal evidence," such a report can hardly negate an experienced physician's awe at a phenomenon that might impress even a dispassionate biometrician, should he ever venture within range of a real patient. Clinicians who would discard common sense and simple observation on the basis of one study should be reminded of Philosophy and Theory's long history of leading medicine astray. As the man said when his wife caught him in bed with another

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woman, "This is not what it looks like! Are you going to believe *me* or your eyes?" Not until the seventeenth century, when doctors began to rely less on the theories of philosophers and more on the evidence of their own eyes at bedside and in the laboratory, was real progress made in healing the sick.

In 1937, at the annual meeting of the American College of Physicians, Dr. W. R. Houston gave a lecture titled "The Doctor Himself as Therapeutic Agent." The subject was the placebo effect. Dr. Houston's use of the term was not restricted to inactive prescriptions, but included the entire spectrum of complex interactions known as the doctor-patient relationship:

> The great lesson, then, of medical history is that the placebo has always been the norm of medical practice. In the large view, we are forced to realize that [physicians'] learning was a learning in how to deal with men. Their skill was a skill in dealing with the emotions of men. They themselves were the therapeutic agents by which cures were effected. Their therapeutic procedures, whether they were inert or whether they were dangerous, were placebos, symbols by which their patients' faith and their own was sustained.

Scholars of the history of therapeutics would very likely go Dr. Houston one better by correcting his use of the past tense. In 1937, there was still far too little that the average doctor could scientifically do for the average patient with the average complaint. Until antibiotics became generally available after World War II, the likelihood of an individual patient being helped by the pharmacologic effects of a doctor's treatment was less than fifty-fifty. Even so, the vast majority of people seeking medical help recovered from their illnesses.

The most obvious reason for such a salubrious state of affairs is one for which the medical profession (and the practitioner of every form of nonscientific healing as well, from ayurveda to amulets) has always taken credit, namely, that the great majority of illnesses get better by themselves—including those with real pathology demonstrable by microscopic or chemical means. Such is the inherent stability of the molecular coping mechanisms of all living organisms that a return to a baseline of normal functioning is to be expected almost every time unless the body's defenses are overwhelmed. That occurs when a malignancy or massive infection has become well established, or when the stabilizing tendencies have lost their inherent ability to cope, as takes place with the incursions of aging.

The healing of any disease involves a complex of factors, but all depend on those inborn corrective forces, which fend off the threats against continuing viability to which every one of our 75 trillion cells is exposed every instant of our lives. The purpose of medical therapy is to abet those defenses. It may accomplish its ends by removing the threat itself (cancer surgery or antibiotics are examples); strengthening the body's own protective mechanisms, or replacing them when they are deficient or absent (transfusion for blood loss, or insulin for diabetes); simply tiding the body over until its own recovery is sufficient to deal with the ravages of the disease (respiratory intubation, or intravenous fluids); or a combination of several of these means.

But the way in which the body combines its own mobilization of forces with a physician's therapies remains obscure. Identical treatments seem to affect individual patients differently, even when their burden of disease appears similar. Researchers in the new field of pharmacogenomics claim that they will soon uncover the DNA-entangled reasons for such differences, and will be able to treat patients with agents designer-made to personalize the biochemical assault on sickness. Such genetically guided therapy will be a great step forward, but I am certain that it is not the entire answer to individual variations in response. It does not, for example, address the variations elicited by different physicians or medical centers when treating the same disease in large and seemingly homogeneous groups of patients, where the size of the population sample would compensate for individual genetic or other organic variations. Certain doctors claim, and can support by statistics, the efficacy of therapies that, in the hands of their colleagues, have less happy outcomes. Other doctors in the same hospital may have better results for other diseases and therapies.

And then there are the more mystical obser-

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vations. These include the patient who survives a terminal disease for a period beyond all expert predictions, long enough, for example, to see a son or daughter graduate from college; or another who refuses to die until a beloved face can be seen once more, even when this requires a delay of days or longer beyond the prognostications of skilled observers. For several years, as an informal test of a general thesis resulting from decades of subjective impressions concerning the effect of holidays on death rates, I have monitored the obituary pages of my local paper, the *New Haven Register,* which covers an area with more than six hundred thousand residents. The death rate falls dramatically before Christmas and rises precipitously after the holiday. Similar findings have been described by others.

Though none of this is attributable to the intervention of doctors, it does speak to a phenomenon more universal and therefore more worthy of investigation: the effect of thoughts, conscious and unconscious, on the body's response to disease. Galen, the Hippocratic authors, and other early physicians very likely thought that the psyche, an immeasurable force beyond human ability to comprehend, somehow acted to produce such effects. *Psyche,* from the Greek word for *soul* or *spirit,* is derived from an Indo-European root that pertains to breathing—thus reflecting the ancient belief that the supernal atmosphere of the cosmos, or macrocosm, is inhaled with his first breath by the microcosm that is a man. Even the Hippocratics, whose major contribution to medical theory was the separation of natural phenomena from supernatural explanations, believed in the mysterious power of the psyche.

In the seventeenth century, Cartesian dualism embedded (*encrusted* might be a better word) into the minds of those who would be serious thinkers the dogma that mind and body are distinct. Though effects of one on the other have always been observed, it was thought that such occurrences were beyond the ability of conjecture or research to explain, since mind is a nonphysical concept and body is a palpable structure. But there is, in fact, no duality. Mind is a function of the organic processes of the brain and almost certainly of the rest of the body as well. In this it is like digestion, which until the early nineteenth century appeared to be just as inscrutable as thought or mind seem today. Our physical and chemical structure determines digestion; digestion in turn influences our physical and chemical structure. In the same way, body determines mind and mind influences body. It is only a matter of time before the unity and interdependence of mind and body—so apparent from observation—is demonstrated scientifically. And when that happens, we will have biophysical explanations for such phenomena as the interrelationship between a patient's expectations or hopes and the outcome of his disease—and even for an occasional person's apparent ability to change the course of an illness when all medical treatment seems to have failed.

In the early 1960s a group of internists and scientists at the University of Rochester demonstrated a connection between the onset of lymphatic cancer, or lymphoma, and a patient's having had a major personal loss within the previous six months, such as the death of a loved one, divorce, or the loss of a home or job. Stimulated by these findings (which until then had been anticipated by many physicians, but never systematically studied), they and others began applying rigorous methods of laboratory and statistical research to such phenomena. The result was the founding of an entirely new area of study, called "psychoneuroimmunology." Though a jawbreaker of a word, the term can be broken down to describe a discipline that explores the relationship among psyche, brain, peripheral and autonomic nervous systems, endocrine gland secretions, immune mechanisms, and response to disease. It blends the bench research of neuroscientists, molecular biologists, immunologists, and physiologists, as well as the more clinical and patient-based work of internists, endocrinologists, social scientists, and psychologists. Their collective goal is to learn how the mind and nervous system work with the rest of the body in responding to factors in the internal and external environment, including those affecting bodily integrity and health.

Among those factors is the doctor himself as therapeutic agent. Behind today's healer is a hoary tradition in which magic was the main—

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and often the only—ingredient of cure, and knowingly or not, doctors today have abandoned little of magic's clinical usefulness. The specialized knowledge, the esoteric language, the symbolic stethoscope, the white coat or the scrub suit, the aura and emotional distance from everyday life of the modern medical center—how different are these from the atmosphere of the Aesculapian temple of healing? There the white-robed priests strolled from patient to patient murmuring incantations, laying on hands, interpreting dreams and the statements made to them by the sick, and recommending a regimen based on principles known only to the *Iatros,* the physician possessed of a corpus of recondite wisdom restricted to his fellows and passed down to the elect. In preserving the ancient Aesculapian symbol of healing, the single snake (how like the stethoscope's dangling tube!) entwined around the priestly staff, the priests of high-tech biomedicine confirm what is obvious from their every act in the art of healing: their authority remains the most basic ingredient of their ability to cure. That authority is the foundation of which Galen wrote almost two thousand years ago—and it is manifest, among other ways, in a patient's wish to please the modern-day *Iatros* by recovering.

Every doctor has anecdotes about this kind of thing, and I have a bagful. This one is a tale I have told many times over the almost forty years since it occurred, because it was my first such experience as a brand new attending surgeon after my residency training. To this day, it is the most dramatic proof of Dr. Houston's thesis that I have encountered. And it also says something about the Hippocratic confidence in the therapeutic power of a physician's goodness.

The clinical history is that of a man in his early forties who was admitted to Yale-New Haven Hospital with empyema, a large collection of infected fluid in the left side of his chest resulting from pneumonia. The organism causing this serious state was the staphylococcus, a bacterium largely resistant to the antibiotics available at the time. Numerous attempts to remove the thick, turbid pus with syringes and tubes had been unsuccessful, because scarring between the lung and chest wall had loculated the noxious stuff into small compartments that could not be effectively drained. Not only that, but these multiple pockets of pus were compressing the lung, seeding the circulation with bacteria, and causing extreme toxicity, with fevers reaching at least 102 degrees each day. A man who had been robustly healthy only a few weeks earlier had become a wan shadow of himself, debilitated and rapidly worsening. The outlook was grave; the senior physicians were pessimistic. As a last resort, they considered the precarious strategy of attempting surgery to remove the cause of contamination. Having been called to consult, I quickly agreed that the only way to clean out the infected areas and free the lung was by means of a hazardous operation. I discussed the dangers of the procedure with the patient and his wife and explained our lack of remaining options. I then scheduled the case for two days hence, to leave time for certain restorative measures before proceeding with surgery of such magnitude. On the afternoon prior to the scheduled day, I saw my patient on rounds and found that he was without fever for the first time since his admission almost two weeks earlier. When his temperature remained normal that evening, I canceled the operation. Within a few more days, physical findings and repeated X-rays made it clear that the patient was improving. A week later he was well enough to be discharged. So inexplicable had been his recovery that even the most cynical clinicians were using words like *miracle.*

A few years later I met my former patient at a wedding, and he told me why he had recovered. Though he was a man of deep religious faith—his name was William Sloane Coffin, and he was chaplain of Yale University—he insisted that nothing miraculous had occurred. "I did it for Bizzozero," he said. "I couldn't let him down." Joe Bizzozero was the intern assigned to this difficult case; he had never faltered in his belief that our patient would get well, even as the odds mounted against such an outcome. In the depths of his concern and compassion, Joe had spent many hours at the bedside of this desperately sick man, never losing hope that a solution might be found. And he did find it. The solution was himself.

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JOURNAL

Diary of a Poem

ANDREW HUDGINS

La pensée est un excrément que l'on thésaurise.

—Anonymous

January 18. "No poet would ever write an ode on the intestine." Lying in bed last night, trying to sleep, I suddenly remembered that sentence, which was quoted in a review in yesterday's *New York Times* of *The Second Brain: The Scientific Basis of Gut Instinct.* Sounds like a challenge to me. Or at least something to think about. It also proves that Michael Gershon, the book's author, doesn't know much about the kinds of things that contemporary poetry embraces. But since I, on my side of this equation of ignorance, know almost nothing about intestines, I will have to buy Gershon's book before I can begin to imagine what an ode to the intestine might say. Still, I can certainly go ahead and think about what approaches the poem might take.

The word "ode" tips us in the direction of celebration. The classical ode, with its elaborately counterpoised strophe, antistrophe, and epode, has come in contemporary practice to mean simply a poem of praise. And in this case the elevated style of the ode and the low subject of the lower gastrointestinal tract would let me explore again the deliberate clashing of form and content, something that has always interested me. Maybe I'll use the same verse form I used when I wrote "Compost: An Ode," a poem that celebrates rotting vegetation. In that poem, though, I could draw on the gardener's near-spiritual reverence for compost, an option that doesn't really exist for the intestines. In the compost ode, I used an iambic pentameter line that stair-steps down the page; scanned across the page, the lines read as blank verse, while each individual line is free verse. To my ear the two rhythms play nicely off each other, and the leavening of the blank verse with white space gives something of the look of the classical ode. It's a good form for celebration, if for no other reason than that it doesn't present the reader with a big, black block of type. It looks light, celebratory.

A project like this will force me to keep busy writing as Erin and I settle into our temporary apartment here in Baltimore. In new places I sometimes spend too much time fretting about where the best grocery store is and not enough time at the desk working. And it'll be even more useful to have a project to occupy my mind when Erin goes back home to Cincinnati and leaves me here alone with my visiting gig in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins.

January 19. Went to the Hopkins bookstore today searching for a copy of *The Second Brain,* but couldn't find it. I'll probably break down and order it from Amazon in the next day or two. As we wandered around the bookstore, I annoyed Erin by refusing to tell her what I was looking for. Talking too much about poetry dissipates the energy you need to get it on the page. If it's expressed one way, it'll never get expressed the other. Or maybe talking about an idea too soon commits you to an early conception of the poem, and limits your ability to throw that idea aside when a better one appears. For the same reason, I don't even like to think too much about poems till I start writing them. The writing is the thinking. Actually, I do write notes beforehand, letting them talk to one another, seeing what sort of rhythm rises

Andrew Hudgins, Professor of English at Ohio State University, is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Babylon in a Jar.* "The Snake," Hudgins's poem about the intestine, was published this summer in the *Paris Review.*

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out of the material itself. But they're minimal—as little as I can get away with. So by deciding to keep a journal about writing a poem, I'm violating one of my oldest working principles. Then why do it? Because I've never done it before, and because, even though I'm afraid it will paralyze me, I'm interested in recording how a poem evolved. I want a record of all the extraneous thought and erased missteps that didn't make it into the final draft. Maybe I can look to it for comfort when I stall on another poem.

I suppose that a poem celebrating the intestines will be about absorption, the taking in of the outside—destroying it to use it, and letting the waste go. But maybe that's because I'm already thinking about issues of assimilation and identity for an autobiographical essay I'm trying to complete.

Thinking about intestines has reminded me that when I was a kid I liked tripe so much that my mother would occasionally, if I begged enough, go to the A&P, instead of to the base commissary, and buy a can for dinner. I loved it. Even its weird chewiness. But part of the kick was that I could go to school the next day and gross out all my friends by telling them that I had eaten fried cow's stomach. I must make sure that I don't do the metaphoric equivalent of that in this poem

Just a couple of months ago, Erin and I bought, for eight dollars, a four-pound bag of chitterlings. "AUNT BESSIE'S CHITTERLINGS," the bag said in huge letters across the top. And in much smaller letters at the bottom: "Product of Denmark." Why would a grocery store in Cincinnati—Porkopolis, as it was called in the nineteenth century—import its hog guts from Europe? Something to ponder.

We boiled them for hours, and they shrank to nothing, a handful of limp tissue. We sautéed them and served them over rice with black-bean sauce. They were very filling and kind of fun, but not really worth all the work we put into them—and we didn't even have to clean them, just cook them.

January 20. Since Erin and I don't know our way around Baltimore, we walked all the way downtown and back—about six miles—to Louie's Bookstore and Café. It's a fancy café with a vestigial bookstore up front, to add, I suppose, an intellectual veneer to the eating of brioches and the drinking of coffee. But we didn't find *The Second Brain.* I came home and ordered it from Amazon.

In the meantime I've been thinking about poems on the same or related subjects, and the only ones I can come up with are Maxine Kumin's "Excrement," an anthology favorite, and if I'm remembering correctly, one by Galway Kinnell called "Shit." And the intestines must be covered in Giles Fletcher's *The Purple Island.* I only vaguely remember Falstaff's riff about guts in *Henry IV.* I can't go to the library and check out this stuff because I don't yet have my temporary faculty card.

I just remembered that when I was at Stanford as a Stegner fellow in 1984, I found a poem in the *North American Review* that contained the line "our viscera kill us." As I remember it, the poem was a villanelle, and "our viscera kill us" was part of one of the repeated lines. I gave dramatic readings of the poem to anyone who would listen, and our teacher, Simone di Piero, who walked into the room to begin the class while I was holding forth, seemed bemused by the pleasure we were all taking in an inadvertently funny line.

January 25. The Second Brain arrived from Amazon on Saturday, but I haven't been able to do more than look at the cover and thumb through it once, because I had to take Erin to the airport Sunday. She's gone back to Cincinnati to take care of the house and dogs, and to work on her novel. And I've been busy getting things pulled together for my first class, which met today. I'm not sure the book is going to give me the sort of vivid descriptions of the intestine and its processes that I'm looking for. It focuses pretty tightly on its thesis that the gut is a sort of abdominal counterbalance to the brain, something that the yogis have been saying for several thousand years. But I'll read the book anyway and see if it gives me any clues, paths, ideas. Got to stop myself from leaping before I have something worth leaping toward.

Intestines received a lot of attention in the Hudgins family when I was a kid. We didn't talk about sex or most other bodily functions, but intestines were somehow an open subject. My brother Mike suffers miserably from spastic

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bowel syndrome, which he attributes to my mother's faith in the cleansing powers of enemas. She gave them to us regularly "to wash out your stomach." My father has suffered from difficult bowels all his life, and at one point he was taking Metamucil and Kaopectate in various dosages throughout the day, balancing one off against the other.

Why the hell am I thinking about this stuff, which will not, pray God, make it into the poem? Just flailing away, I guess, trying to find my way into the subject from every angle I can think of. Louis Simpson's poem about American poetry digesting everything in its path is sort of an intestine poem, isn't it? And isn't there an intestine scene in *Gargantua*? Must be.

January 26. A preliminary conclusion in my thinking about intestines: I'm glad I have them. I'd never want to do without them. And that is how I amused myself as I walked to campus today. I spent twenty minutes trying to find the catalogue on the library computer, which seemed determined to direct me to the Internet and to a bunch of databases—everything but to the damn books that were shelved a dozen feet away from me. Finally I tracked down a couple of scientific discussions of the intestines that seemed simple enough for me to understand. But I'm coming to see that these science books are not going to give me the sensual details of the intestine that I crave. I may have to find a doctor to talk to.

Another idea that flits through my head is writing this poem as a sestina, since I will be teaching students how to write sestinas this semester and I've never written one. At Iowa, one of my teachers, to make a point that eluded me even then, read twenty sestinas in a row to the class. The point I took away from this was that I hated sestinas. Hearing those repeated words buzz around again and again in a precise swirl was like being attacked by six astonishingly aggressive bees. I whispered to my friend Jennifer Atkinson, "If I ever write one of those horrible things, shoot me."

On the other hand, the kind of anal retentiveness that kept me to that vow—that quite worthy vow, it still seems to me—is the perfect subject for such an obsessive form. I'll think about it.

January 27. Fourteen hours have passed, and I have recovered from my insane idea of writing a sestina on the intestines. Can you imagine repeating the word *intestine* six times in the course of a poem? By the time you got to the third repetition, the listeners would start to giggle, and by the time you got to the fifth they'd be laughing out loud, a hilarity that would only build as you got to the sixth and seventh repetitions. Of course there's nothing wrong with writing a funny poem, but that's not what I'm interested in. Too easy. Plus this is supposed to be an ode. And odes ain't funny.

I'm beginning to wonder if this whole idea isn't misbegotten.

What a silly thing it is to single out the intestine and say no one has ever written an ode to it. The only internal organs that you might guess have had odes written to them are the heart (for the romantics) and the brain (for the classical or neoclassical poets). Even then, the heart ode would be addressed not to the organ that pumps blood but to the symbolic heart, the seat of passion, and the brain ode would be addressed not to the actual gray matter but to the mind. In our rankings of the viscera for ode potential, the stomach comes in a distant third. Perhaps some Epicurean would like to take that on. But pancreas, gall bladder, kidneys, thyroid, and pineal gland are too obscure. Except for the kidneys and bladder, I have almost no idea what the others even do, which limits my ability to celebrate them.

January 27, later. Spent the afternoon skimming two extremely tedious books on digestion that I checked out of the library yesterday, and for my efforts learned only one cool word: *lumen.* According to the *American Heritage Dictionary,* it is "the inner open space of a tubular organ, as of a blood vessel or an intestine." From the Latin for "light," "eye," "opening." Despite this marvelous discovery, my project gives every sign of heading toward the ICU. So I asked Erin to mail me, from Cincinnati, my copy of *Dirty, Rotten, Dead?,* a wonderfully detailed and cheerfully perverse children's book about death and decay that I toyed with giving to my nephews for Christmas before I lost my nerve. In the service of environmental aware-

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ness, the book describes what happens to a raccoon during the two weeks after he dies in the forest. For the urban child who cannot relate to raccoons, it explicates in clinical detail the coronary malfunctions that led to Mr. Soto's being found dead on the floor of his grocery store with his eyes still open when young Ronald Jones ("everyone called him Ronjo") bops in one afternoon to buy a carton of milk. In the past, I have raided this book for good descriptions of decay. It also has a section that describes digesting and pooping for children. That's the kind of info I need.

January 29. I'm a bit blue about this poem. I have accumulated only a few stray half-lines and a vague idea or two. I wonder if this is just the normal long time that it takes me to get started. Or, as I speculated in the beginning, is this journal diluting the impulse to write?

I'd like to get deeper into the reading, too. Look at those damn graduate-level physiology texts again, maybe go to a bookstore and see if I can find a book aimed more at the general reader, and root around in Giles Fletcher's *The Purple Island*, which I found today in the library. But schoolwork is already crowding me. After the very first class, two students handed me complete manuscripts to read, which I am happy to do. That is, after all, my job. But it does cut into the writing time.

Anyway—that's "anyway" with a long sigh, the way my cousin always says it. *Anyway*, if this thing doesn't work out, I'll have the pleasure of remembering the half-amused, one-quarter puzzled, and one-quarter alarmed look that flew across the face of my colleague John Irwin when I asked him at lunch yesterday, "Do you know any poems about intestines?" And the long pause on the phone this afternoon when I asked my friend Dana Gioia the same question.

I called my old teacher Bob Halli at the University of Alabama, and he suggested I look at the famous scene in *Paradise Lost* in which Satan encounters Sin and Death. I didn't remember any intestines in that scene. When I reread it, I found that when Sin gave birth to Satan's child Death, he "tore through my entrails," and as a result of her pain and fear, which distorted her appearance, "all my nether shape thus grew / Transformed" to something hideous, while the upper half of her body remained beautiful. Immediately after his birth, Death raped his mother and she conceived

> These yelling monsters, that with ceaseless cry
> Surround me, as thou sawest, hourly conceived
> Hourly born, with sorrow infinite
> To me; for when they list, into the womb
> That bred them they return, and howl, and gnaw
> My bowels, their repast; then, bursting forth
> Afresh, with conscious terrors vex me round,
> That rest or intermission none I find.

A sad story certainly, but not what I am looking for.

A little closer to the point was Bob's other suggestion, that I look into a scene in *The Faerie Queene* that I barely remembered. The knights enter the house of Alma, which is presented as a living thing, a human body, with its own approximation of the alimentary canal:

> The maister Cooke was cald *Concoction*,
> A carefull man, and full of comely guise:
> The kitchin Clerke, that hight *Digestion*,
> Did order all th'Achates in seemely wise,
> And set them forth, as well he could deuise.
> The rest had seuerall offices assiud,
> Some to remoue the scum, as it did rise;
> Others to beare the same away did mind;
> And others it to vse according to his kind.
>
> But all the liquour, which was fowle and wast,
> Not good nor seruiceable else for ought,
> They in another great round vessell plast,
> Till by a conduit pipe it thence were brought:
> And all the rest, that noyous was, and nought,
> By secret wayes, that none might it espy,
> Was close conuaid, and to the back-gate brought,
> That cleped was *Port Esquiline*, whereby
> It was auoided quite, and throwne out priuily.

Fun, but too metaphorical for my purposes.

January 30. When I was in high school, the *Reader's Digest* took us month by month through Joe's body with articles narrated by his organs. The article on testicles was unforgettably titled "I Am Joe's Man Gland." I may have to go to the library and see if the *Reader's Digest* published an article called "I Am Joe's Intestine." Instead, I'm reading along in the bumptiously written Gershon book and starting to get a few ideas, even though the book is mostly, at least in the early chapters, con-

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cerned with the nerves in the gut. The man thinks, by the way, that *simplistic* means *simple,* and perhaps for most doctors it does.

I'm just being cranky because, as it turns out, Ol' Doc Gershon *did* know more about poetry than I did. There is no ode to the intestine that I can find, and my efforts to imagine how I'd write one without turning it into a mock-lyric are coming up blank. That old clash of low subject and high language is the problem, and even though I myself don't see guts, bile, mucus, feces, and the rectum as taboo subjects, the language sure does. The nervous giggle those words produce is probably an insuperable obstacle to an ode, at least for me, and attempts to avoid them could easily lead to the high comedy of euphemism—as we'll see if Fletcher's poetic tour of the intestines is anything like the part of his poem that I'm already familiar with. Tradition and denotation: just what are we going to do with those two bad boys?

February 1. This morning I received in my e-mail a list of English subtitles in Kung Fu movies. From that list I have selected the Intestine Quote of the Day: "How can you use my intestines as a gift?"

And just for the hell of it, here's a subtitle that speaks an incontrovertible truth, even in this heyday of moral relativism: "A normal person wouldn't steal pituitaries."

February 2, Groundhog Day. When you start looking for something, you'll find it everywhere. From the comic strip "Zippy":

> Zippy: I had a really bad stomach ache yesterday, Griffy.
> Griffy: Yeh, because you ate all that junk food! You're not a machine, Zippy! Respect your intestines!
> Zippy: You mean all those yards and yards of tubes inside my abdominal cavity?

My buddy John Drury wrote from Cincinnati and reminded me of Li Po's line about the road being as crooked as pig guts. Other than that, he too has come a cropper on poems about intestines. I guess I really do have to concede this point to Gershon; there is no ode to the intestine.

Groundhog burrows are sort of like intestines, don't you think? They're convoluted, they're dark, they're out of sight, and they have something nasty moving through them. That's the gardener's perspective, I suppose.

February 3. On the other hand, maybe Dr. Gershon would accept as an ode-equivalent this passage from *The Purple Island* (1633), by Phineas Fletcher (not Giles). I mixed up my Fletcher brothers. The poem is subtitled "The Isle of Man." The purple island is the human body, and Fletcher tours the island, internally and externally—feature by feature and organ by organ—for twelve cantos composed of 679 seven-line stanzas: a total of 4,753 lines. The poem is illuminated by the author's own copious marginalia up through the fifth canto, when Phineas begins to flag. The part about the intestines is in Canto II, stanzas 39–43. Stanza 39 begins by addressing the role of the intestines in satisfying hunger.

39

Such would the state of this whole Island be,
If those pipes windings (passage quick delaying)
Should not refrain too much edacitie,
With longer stay fierce appetite allaying.
These pipes are seven-fold longer then the Isle,
Yet all are folded in a little pile,
Whereof three noble are, and thinne; three
thick, & vile.

40

The first is narrow'st, and down-right doth look,
Lest that his charge discharg'd might back retire;
And by the way takes in a bitter brook,
That when the chanel's stopt with stifeling mire,
Through th' idle pipe with piercing waters
soking,
His tender sides with sharpest stream provoking,
Thrusts out the muddy parts, & rids the miry
choking.

41

The second lean and lank, still pill'd, and harried
By mighty bord'rers oft this barns invading:
Away his food and new-inn'd store is carri'd;
Therefore an angry colour, never fading,
Purples his cheek: the third for length exceeds,

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And down his stream in hundred turnings leads:
These three most noble are, adorn'd with
silken threads.

In case your sense of seventeenth-century physiology is as shaky as mine, Fletcher's marginalia helpfully explain that "The second is called the lank or hungry gut, as being more emptie then the rest: for the liver being neare it sucks out his juice, or cream: it is known from the rest by the red colour." He does not insult our intelligence by explaining what the silken threads are. Back to our travelogue:

42

The formost of the base half blinde appeares;
And where his broad way in an *Isthmos* ends,
There he examines all his passengers,
And those who ought not scape, he backward
sends:
The second *Aeols* court, where tempests raging
Shut close within a cave the windes encaging,
With earthquakes shakes the Island, thunders sad
presaging.

And now, at last, our exhilarating voyage through the lower GI tract winds to its melancholy end. We have reached the colon and rectum:

43

The last down-right falls to port *Esquiline,*
More strait above, beneath still broader growing;
Soon as the gate opes by the Kings assigne,
Empties it self, farre thence the filth out-throwing:
This gate endow'd with many properties,
Yet for his office sight and naming flies;
Therefore between two hills, in darkest valley.

February 9. I have accumulated a few notes, scraps of lines, that may add up to something over time. I have my doubts, but then I always do. Everything I've got keeps organizing itself in very portentous rhythms—pretentious edging into silly. Thus does my determination to avoid light verse present its own problems. I'll stick with this for at least a couple of days, but I'm beginning to expect that this thing will soon end up in the drafts folder, from which few souls escape. But who knows? It could still catch fire.

February 13. What better day than the day before Valentine's Day to talk about intestines? I've actually been sketching out a version of the poem, pushing it through close to ten drafts over the last several days. It started to work—or at least get interesting—when I put it into two-beat lines, just to see how that affected the tone. I like how the short lines, with all their interruptions of the rhythm, muted the heaviness of the longer lines, so I stuck with them even though I kept hearing a voice in my head say, "Sure, for intestines you're going to write a poem that looks long and skinny on the page. You know, like an intestine. Wink, wink. Nudge, nudge."

February 15. I want to write about the poem and I don't want to write about it. Having got some real traction in the poem itself, I'm reluctant even to admit that, for fear of jinxing things.

February 16. This morning I typed up the poem, printed it, and mailed it to Erin to see what she thinks.

Now that it's finished, or close enough to finished for me to send off for criticism, I read back though these notes to see what surprised me. What doesn't surprise me is how my sense of the poem changed as I wrestled with it. As I read over my early ideas, I remembered Mark Strand's saying, "The poem that drew these words from me is not this poem."

When I actually sat down to write, after my notes had achieved critical mass, I resisted the image of the snake at first as being too obvious a metaphor of the intestines. Once I did give in to that image, I resisted as even more obvious the Garden of Eden image that accompanied it. But when I gave in to them, I was able, I think, to see through to something in them that is not obvious, and is in fact pretty interesting: the body as the garden and the snake as essential to the survival of the garden, which it destroys. On the other hand, I'm always surprised when my fascination with the inextricable relation of flesh to mind rises up and takes over yet another poem. Though some of the celebratory impulse of the ode I kept, the poem has found its form as a meditation on appetite—which of course has nothing to do with abstinence.

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I wasn't surprised by how little of my research ended up in the poem. Out of the one book I read and the two I skimmed, about the only things I kept were Gershon's passing reference to the intestines as a snake and the word *lumen.* Still, I don't think I could have written the poem without the background reading. Though I didn't use it overtly, the immersion in the material kept my brain focused on the poem and also kept it open, looking for connections. Even the Fletcher poem, bad as it is, alerted me to some of the problems of writing about the intestines, and led me away from my initial determination to write an ode.

Here's the poem:

THE SNAKE

When we open,
the snake opens
with us—old
rumble gullet,
acid tunnel.
We are the snake's
garden—his garden,
his gate, his adam
and eve—and he,
the snake, plays
the role of the snake.
We are his tree
of the knowledge of
good and evil,
which is desire,
which is good and evil—
desire, which
is appetite,
which is the snake
that feeds then starves us,
and, thus, we are
his paradise,
which is emptiness,
lumen, the light
we fill with darkness,
the labyrinth
of reptile running
entrance to exit—
rumble gullet,
acid tunnel,
the great dissolver,
the snake god
hungering
in the blood garden.

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• BOOKS •

REREADING

Relics of Saint Katherine

PATRICIA HAMPL

Katherine Mansfield might have been for me, as she probably is for most readers, one of the usual suspects rounded up in the anthologies, represented by her "perfect" short story, "The Garden Party." She might have surfaced again in biographies of her more celebrated friends—Virginia Woolf, who saw her as a rival, and D. H. Lawrence, who used her as the model for Gudrun in *Women in Love*. And then she might have receded into that twilight where minor writers refuse to be extinguished entirely, trailing clouds of her "exquisite" sensibility, the unfulfilled promise of her talent excused by her early death.

Mansfield might have been no more than a filmy background figure had I come to her through her fiction. But I read her *Journal* and *Letters* first, documents pulsing with her ardent confusion of art and life, matters I was just beginning to scramble up myself. "I want to *work*," she confided to her journal,

> . . . so to live that I work with my hands and my feeling and my brain. I want a garden, a small house, grass, animals, books, pictures, music. And out of this, the expression of this, I want to be writing. (Though I may write about cabmen. That's no matter.) But warm, eager, living life—to be rooted in life—to learn, to desire to know, to feel, to think, to act. That is what I want.

She articulated for me what it was to want to *be* a writer—and against heavy odds.

But even the autobiographical intimacy of those forms—journals and letters—doesn't explain the fascination for Mansfield that developed in my teens and persisted into my twenties. The word "fascination" hardly states the case. For years—in college and graduate school and beyond, through dumb jobs and frequent moves from one crummy apartment to another as I too tried "to be a writer"—home was where I hammered a nail and hung my photograph of Mansfield's hieratic, consumptive face. My shrine, my saint.

I read everybody with fierce appetite during those years—Whitman, Woolf, Lawrence, poets beyond count. But I didn't just *read* Mansfield. I stalked her. I chased down primary sources, secondary sources, tracking any shred of memory or gossip. When I learned from Frieda Lawrence's memoir that, during the period when they had lived next door to each other in Cornwall, Mansfield had introduced her to Cuticura soap, I was off to Walgreens, dazzled to find that in 1968 it was still possible to buy the assertive clove-scented bar. A relic.

I learned from one of Mansfield's biographers (for a supposedly minor writer, she had quite a few) that Mansfield liked to keep "low bowls of bright flowers" on her writing table: I affected the same. She favored little jackets of "lovely colours and soft velvet materials": soon my style as well, though my latter-day velvets draped over jeans. Mine was the moist devotion of a cultist, not the frank pleasure of a reader.

Of course I also read the short stories. I ap-

Patricia Hampl is Regents' Professor at the University of Minnesota. Her most recent book is *I Could Tell You Stories*. Her other books include two memoirs, *A Romantic Education* and *Virgin Time*.

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proved the transparency of Mansfield's prose, the click of her snapshot scenes, her perfect-pitch ear for a volley of dialogue, her descriptive delight in the world. The voice in my favorite stories ("Prelude," "At the Bay") combined a cool authority with an unspoken, and therefore all the more convincing, heartache for her lost New Zealand. I knew that her Wellington had hardly been cherished at the time. Like me in St. Paul, she knew she was a provincial, and she longed to escape—and she did, to London in 1908, before she was twenty. But successful nostalgia is bred of regret, and Katherine Mansfield was a great regretter. After her relatively brief wild-thing period, illness turned her into a pondering, sometimes frantic, invalid. Her gleeful escape was twisted into lonely exile.

Her fiction had a more aloof voice, of course, than the urgent *Journal* and *Letters*, but this too was evidence of her particular genius: the ability both to bare her soul and to write works of detached authority. She exposed the membrane between self and work, the porous fiber that transformed a raw girlish ambition and overheated poeticism into the remorseless assurance of fiction.

Why were there no novels? I wondered briefly, but even this lack turned into virtue: Mansfield was a miniaturist, not a big-sweep writer, and all the finer for that, a noticer of moments and gestures, a tender of oblique details. She fretted about this: "Don't I live in *glimpses only?*" she wrote in a letter. But she also understood that her idea of a story's form was genuinely new, *"pure risk,"* as she said, moving not by plot but by impression and association, episodes strung on a brief string of time. Her vision was essentially poetic, not narrative, and this enlivened her voice and, for me, her appeal. Her "glimpses" gave her work—the stories as well as the letters—a striking immediacy. For all her intensity, she was not a fainter and swooner. She was modern and proud of it. Her humor was mordant, even unkind. Her lyricism had a squeeze of lemon.

Mansfield suffered—this too was important to me. She died at thirty-four after enduring years of tuberculosis. Her youthful death hovered everywhere, even in her most rhapsodic flights. No wonder there were no novels. But there was nothing self-destructive about her: her tubercular lungs were bursting to live, live. My saint might die, but extinguish herself? Never. Would Chekhov have killed himself? And Chekhov, I learned from the critics (including Mansfield's husband and arch-promoter, John Middleton Murry), was the writer she most resembled.

In fact, it seems to me now that she more truly resembled Jean Rhys (Mansfield nailed the "woman alone" theme before Rhys got to it). Even more fundamentally, Colette was her kin. Like Colette, Mansfield had her youthful cabaret period, complete with club performances and lesbian flirtations, and though she wrote of the first generation of urban "free" women, her signature was her sensuous evocations of nature. She wrote from her beloved Côte d'Azur:

> After lunch today, we had a sudden tremendous thunderstorm, the drops of rain were as big as marguerite daisies—the whole sky was violet. I went out the very moment it was over—the sky was all glittering with broken light—the sun a huge splash of silver. The drops were like silver fishes hanging from the tree.

Had she lived, she might very likely have become an English Colette, an earthier mother-of-us-all than Virginia Woolf.

Virginia Woolf might write to her sister, in an initial assessment of Mansfield, that she found her "cheap and hard . . . unscrupulous." But Mansfield had the keener eye for character, writing to Ottoline Morrell after this first meeting that she sensed in Woolf "the strange trembling, glinting quality of her mind. . . . She seemed to me to be one of those Dostoevsky women whose 'innocence' has been hurt."

The *Journal* and the *Letters* were suffused with consumptive ecstasy. She saw this in Lawrence: "I recognized his smile—just the least shade too bright . . . his air of being a touch more vividly alive than other people—the gleam. . . . " Her "work," as she wrote in the *Journal*, became a kind of parallel universe, spiritualized, even sacralized, as the clock ran out. She spoke severely of "sinning against art." This too I revered: the religion of art.

Keats (dead at twenty-five, also of TB) was *her* saint. She wrote of him in her journal as of

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a colleague. Like her, he was also a hero-worshiper: he lugged around a portrait of Shakespeare wherever he lived. I perceived in—or created from—this relationship a lineage that lifted Mansfield out of the low-rent housing where she lodged in the anthologists' rented rooms. Boldly (if privately) I attached her to the great Romantic dynasty, as configured expressly by and for me: Shakespeare→Keats→Mansfield. I dragooned her into the firmament.

And who was going to stop me? It was the early seventies, and we were supposed to be "discovering" women writers, wedging them *into the literary canon any which way. Yet it is* strange that I fastened on Mansfield. Virginia Woolf, whose novels I read at the time and admired, did not compel me to buy her brand of face soap. Mansfield was my girl. But then, I didn't "discover" her. She had been willed to me.

I must have been about seventeen when Doris Derman turned to me in her majestic old apartment off Summit Avenue in St. Paul, and said in response to something I had said and have now entirely forgotten, "That is the sort of observation Katherine Mansfield made."

I had never heard of Katherine Mansfield. For a moment I thought Doris was referring to a friend of hers. In any case, Doris Derman, worldly mother of my first boyfriend, was willing to make the introduction. "You may have these," she said, and walked over to her ceiling-high bookcase (itself an essential prop of the life I hoped to enter: the life of the mind) and handed me two books, one bound in faded orange linen with a yet-more-faded green spine, the other in a sad blue with dull silver lettering. The orange, its title stamped in worn gold, was the *Letters*, the blue was the *Journal*.

It is hard to convey how stunned I was to realize that such personal writings had been *published*. Stories, novels, poems—these were the stuff of books, weren't they? But letters, diaries—I wrote them myself; I never imagined they could be "literature."

Doris Derman was the first person, aside from teachers, I heard speak with authority about books and writers. But her authority was different; she spoke not from a height but from within the precinct of the initiated. She had opinions, and they were based on nothing but her own taste and whim. This was unheard-of in my convent-school world of hierarchy and certainty, where references to authority were—authoritative.

Living in the same neighborhood, in the same parish (as Catholic St. Paul referenced all civic boundaries), Doris knew my family, knew who I was and from whence I came. But we had never met until her son brought me home. He artlessly confessed to me that his mother had told him before this meeting, "Beware of a girl whose family believes the world is no bigger than Linwood Avenue between Lexington and Oxford." *Our block.*

I was neither hurt nor insulted by this tart dismissal, which, of course, I was not intended to hear. In fact, I approved. It confirmed my own readiness to dismiss St. Paul, which squashed me far more (I later thought) than Katherine Mansfield's stodgy Wellington had squashed her. But more than that: I was subtly thrilled that Doris had captured us, had summed us up—had written us, in effect. My family did not talk this way, did not think this way. The hauteur necessary to make such a remark, the aerial aloofness from—well, from Linwood between Lexington and Oxford—would have given my family nosebleeds. Doris's cool ability to consign us to the higher world of description—to fiction, really—won me even before I met her.

I understood that Doris had once "written." There was the definite sense that as someone who *had written*, she was in possession of talent, vast sums she held prudently in ethereal escrow. She was a good ten years older than the other mothers in the parish, and dyed her hair a blatant, unapologetic blonde. She had no interest in school functions. She let her husband handle the grocery shopping and the driving and the dealings with nuns and teachers. He was a gentle man who seemed conscripted to serve her, nervously asking—as he handed her a drink he had mixed in the kitchen while she sat in the shadowy living room, reading—whether she felt all right. Though her husband was Catholic and of course her son was too, she was alluringly non-Catholic. In fact, it appeared she was not religious at all, perhaps an agnostic.

This was all good, good news.

I can't think of Katherine Mansfield without

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conjuring Doris Derman—not because she entrusted her books to me and set me on the particular literary path (favoring clarity and immediacy, the bittersweet but fundamentally comic point of view) that I still think of as the high road. Not even because she introduced me to the "personal voice" in literature when she handed me Mansfield's *Journal* and *Letters*, thus opening the door to memoir and the essay, forms I came to prize and practice. It's simply that, over the years, her passion for Mansfield has become more eloquent to me than my own strenuous teen-idol feelings.

Doris was a teenager when Mansfield died in 1923. She belonged to the generation that had just inherited the short skirts and bold bobbed haircuts which Mansfield, for one, made the daring symbol of the new woman. Doris saw Mansfield as a tantalizing bohemian big sister. She'd been up to no good, and look what happened: sick, alone, exiled, dead. Her slim "oeuvre" was dwarfed by the journals and the passionate correspondence, in which she alternately bemoaned her fate and shored up her courage and ever-dimming hopes with crystalline descriptions of the world about her. They are among the great letters in English literature, fairly compared to the letters of Keats.

Doris pondered all sides of the story, the glory of the bold escape from the provinces, the sexual high-jinks, the brilliant lyric sensibility, the desperate final mysticism. The circumstances of Mansfield's death—a final massive hemorrhage at the Gurdjieff community near Fontainebleu, where she had gone to "purify" herself—bespoke both the barely grasped independence of the "new woman" and the dismal fate that awaited her for stepping outside the assigned circle of safety. It was what a later generation of women would call a liberated life. And you got hammered for it. Doris's fascination with Mansfield had to do with what she revealed about the catastrophic results of attempting to be free. Better to "have written" briefly, sometime in the past, better to sock your talent safely away. Better to stay high in the shadowy apartment on Summit Avenue, keep your hair glamour-bright, accept another drink from your hovering husband.

Mansfield was the doomed artist for Doris's generation. Make that the doomed woman artist: the exemplary figure who combined talent, youth, beauty, drive, and early death. Virginia Woolf, who committed suicide at sixty, lived too long to be this kind of figure. The doomed artist must be extinguished before endeavor has fully transmitted itself into achievement. Death is the massive gilt frame that pulls the eye away from the work to the life. But that's the point: with certain writers it is impossible (and for Doris, undesirable) to separate the two. Doris was mesmerized not by the fire of Mansfield's talent but by the extinguished flame, the burnt wick.

Mansfield was her generation's version of Sylvia Plath. Or, to put it in the proper chronology, Plath was my generation's version—after another world war and much else (including the development of drugs to cure TB)—of Mansfield. Plath's suicide was, of course, the opposite of Mansfield's frantic dash—from French seaside to Swiss alpine chalet, from doctors to quacks and finally to a proto–New-Age guru—to save herself. But like Mansfield's, Plath's talent and achievement were genuine. Their work would still count even if their lives had not been tragic. Without their early deaths, however, they would not have become exemplary—or cautionary—figures for the women who studied them so fervently.

In Mansfield, Doris Derman chose a woman on whom the fates descended, but whose pact with life itself not only remained unbroken but was cranked up to an almost excruciating pitch of desire and attachment. In Plath, my generation chose a model of brilliant sourness, a woman whose fury was finally directed at life itself, not at its cruel refusal to admit her and sustain her. Our choice of a suicide may be a gloomy commentary on my generation. But even if Plath was exemplary because she represented what we wished to avoid becoming, she was still the lost woman writer who came to haunt us, as Mansfield haunted Doris Derman. There was this difference, though: Doris, I think, felt companioned by Mansfield. She was, in spite of everything, a benign ghost.

Like Plath's, Mansfield's gifts were augmented by a journal, a voluminous correspondence, and a literary husband-editor. Mansfield's cool talent and her desperado life were indelibly bonded, if they had not been before, by John Middleton Murry's publication of the *Journal* in 1927, just four years after her death.

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The *Letters* followed swiftly in 1928. Although Mansfield knew a measure of literary, if not truly popular, fame in her lifetime, her appeal really hit its international stride as a result of Murry's decision to fashion her personal writing into books that encouraged her to take, as he gushingly said, "her rightful place as the most wonderful writer and most beautiful spirit of our time."

In other words, as a disgusted friend remarked at the time, Murry was "boiling Katherine's bones to make soup."

Doris did not see it this way—and of course, neither did I. We believed in books. We spoke of them as of people whose integrity was above reproach, not objects fashioned and formed. We approved, even revered, the final rhapsodic line of the *Journal:* "*All is well.*" We took the italics to heart, as if they conveyed a final triumphant testament. *All is well.*

Ah! Doris and I said, bowing our heads before the courageous farewell of our heroine. Ah!

Now, all these years later, I have come with two new friends, an English woman and her Danish husband, to Bandol: Mansfield's Bandol, as I think of it, a quiet Mediterranean fishing village (in her day), a gleaming tourist town (in ours). I've been given an apartment for four months in a nearby town, as part of a writing fellowship—the sort of improbable postmodern perk that would have astonished Mansfield in her fruitless search for a safety net.

This day trip to Bandol is an unabashed pilgrimage, though my days as a cultist are over. Here, during separate visits, Mansfield wrote "Prelude" and "Bliss" (which I have just reread and have urged on my friends, glad the stories still seem fresh, glad to spread the word, as Doris once passed it to me). I have also reread some of the letters. But their magic has gone dark now. Gone, the old thrill of exalted sensibility, the breathless lyric acuity. Gone, the romantic scrim that saved me from seeing what it was all about: utter terror of the death bearing down on her.

We are looking for the place where Mansfield wrote "Bliss," the Hôtel Beau-Rivage, a name so evocative it sounds like a hotel in a story rather than a hotel where a story was written. It is a beautiful day, still winter, as people here insist, though as a Minnesotan I know that this is foolishness, that we are deep into spring, trees blossoming, tables set out for lunch, sailboats groaning companionably in their slips.

We have one of those lunches they write about in magazines. It is timeless and winey. There is crème caramel quivering under its burnt sugar in a fluted glass dish, and little cups of bitter coffee to set you straight at the end of the meal.

Then we walk up the street to the hotel, a great peachy Belle Epoque business, the grounds parklike and gracious. A very small old man is pruning, with scissors far too big for him, an immense wisteria vine that covers an entire wall. The vine's main branch, espaliered against the stone wall, is as thick as a tree. The scent is overpowering.

The old man smiles at my request: he has heard this before, and silently leads us through the grounds to the hotel entrance, where we are handed over to a likewise diminutive old woman, either his mate or his colleague. She points to the plaque mounted in the vestibule. In French it says: "Three hours ago I finished my story 'Bliss.' Thank God I had great happiness in the writing of it."

The small woman nods as the old man did, ready to accommodate: yes, I may go up and see The Room. So up the little *ascenseur* we go, the little woman, Susan, Steffen, and I. Up to the top (third) floor—and there it is, the door open (all the doors of all the rooms are open, waiting for their nonexistent occupants). It's now a double room, as it had not been when Mansfield stayed here in 1918. Appliances are lined up along one wall to make a kitchenette. It is not exactly "seedy," not even "tacky," just honestly, seriously worn. The place was probably lovely in its day, but it looks as if it was redone in the miserable fifties and left to pickle in its unhealthy browns and beiges, its sickish greens. Oddly, the very cheapness of the veneers, the "modern" furniture sighing with shabbiness—all of it enshrines the life of hired rooms and not much money: her life.

The little woman nods—I may step out through the double French doors onto the balcony. I am in the air, looking out—as she must have looked when she rose from her

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desk, after her three hours of "happiness in the writing"—to the same thrilling sea (more boats, more people, more everything now, but the same blue, the same exalted height). "She took the best room," the tiny old woman murmurs, as if to say we all know that Katherine would of course take the best.

My new friend Susan, who has not yet read Mansfield, is wiping away tears. "Thank goodness she had happiness in the writing," she says. "She had so little happiness."

"Katherine has been dead a week," Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary after the news came from France:

> At that one feels—what? A shock of relief?—a rival the less? Then confusion at feeling so little—then, gradually, blankness & disappointment; then a depression which I could not rouse myself from all that day. When I began to write, it seemed to me there was no point in writing. Katherine wont read it. Katherine's my rival no longer. . . . Still there are things about writing I think of & want to tell Katherine. And I was jealous of her writing—the only writing I have ever been jealous of.

It was sometime in the late eighties that I read this rawly honest passage. Woolf's *Diaries* were being published, the biographies were coming thick and fast. There was more about Mansfield as well. It turned out, according to a carefully sleuthed biography by Claire Tomalin, that although Mansfield had indeed died of tuberculosis, it was undiagnosed gonorrhea, contracted during her first year of "freedom," that had weakened her and left her fatally vulnerable.

So much for freedom. Even the *Journal*'s *"All is well"* finale proved to be a bit of stagecraft—John Middleton Murry's. He had not simply "edited" the *Journal;* he had orchestrated it, piecing bits together to form a narrative that ended with this apparent triumph of the spirit.

But I could not tell this to Doris. She was long gone by the time I read the post-cult biographies. My mother, still living in the neighborhood, had reported that people first noticed that the milkman (the milkman!) was showing up later and later on his rounds. Drinking at the Dermans, was the word. Doris was dead drunk at 10:00 A.M., according to the woman at the drugstore. Also: seen wandering on Grand Avenue, alarming blonde hair in disarray, wearing bathroom slippers in the snow.

Then, not seen at all, spending all her time in the dark, the blinds pulled, not even sobering up when her husband came home, the children grown up and well out of it by now. Finally, sprawled on the bathroom floor, "found" by her husband when he came home from work downtown.

We had read the last line of the *Journal* as a message to us, almost a directive. *All was well.* Doris and I stayed with Mansfield to the end, past the little pleasures of tea at the Villa Isola Bella in lemon-sunny Menton, where she wrote some of her best late stories. We followed her to the thin air of Sierre, high in the Alps, past her furious disappointment in Murry. Doris had made short work of him: "Obviously a drip," she said. We stayed with Katherine (as we called her) right to the moment she entered the weird community at Fontainebleu and died her gasping, operatic death after running up a flight of steps. "She was so happy," Doris had told me. It was if she was there. "She forgot to be careful."

Still, *all was well.* Katherine had said so. Doris never had reason to disbelieve her testimony. Or maybe Doris kept to herself just how well she thought everything really was. Maybe she didn't wish to disillusion me, maybe she wanted to pass along the literary torch, burning with a "too bright" gleam but, all the same, shedding the only light that mattered to us.

My mother saw it more simply. "Doris was a fine woman," she said, as if someone had suggested otherwise. She did not like the gossip about the milkman. "She was a lady. She had talent." Then she paused, searching for what she really meant, what between us was highest praise: "She was a serious reader."

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Eternal Africa

GEORGE PACKER

THE SHADOW OF THE SUN

by Ryszard Kapuściński. Translated from the Polish by Klara Glowczewska. Knopf. $25.

A mystery has always hovered over the work of Ryszard Kapuściński, and around this mystery a kind of cult has formed. As the Polish Press Agency's first and only resident correspondent in sub-Saharan Africa, Kapuściński was single-handedly responsible for covering the continent's wars, coups, famines—the violent drama of post-colonial Africa in the years after he first arrived in 1957. The improbability of his career as an agency reporter from an Iron Curtain country, lacking the money or influence of his Western counterparts and writing in a language hardly anyone outside Poland speaks, forced him to be more resourceful than other reporters, and perhaps gave him the freedom to see Africa as something older, deeper, and more vital than another theater of the Cold War. Coming from a European country that has itself been colonized for most of its modern history, Kapuściński writes about Africa as a white man but not as a representative of Western power. Like his countryman Conrad and his contemporary Naipaul, he identifies with those on the historical margins. He seems almost indifferent to geopolitics, or any kind of politics; his eye tends to wander away from the main action, toward a solitary man walking south from Eritrea into Ethiopia, looking for his brother.

One after another, Kapuściński's books, based on his reporting and originally published in Warsaw, were translated into English: books on the Ethiopian revolution, the fall of the Shah, the end of Portuguese rule in Angola. Western readers began to discover that the Polish Press Agency's Africa correspondent was a writer of great literary gifts. And the question arose: was this journalism, or was it literature? *The Emperor,* his book about the fall of Haile Selassie, consists of reminiscences of the King of Kings by former members of the imperial court, identified only by their initials, all endowed with precisely the same talent for lyrical phrasing and philosophical aphorism. Rather than offering the barrage of proper nouns and party acronyms that might have made it incomprehensible and irrelevant to outsiders, Kapuściński's account of a decadent regime and its violent overthrow has the quality of some reimagined ancient drama. Exactness yields to evocativeness: almost nothing can be fact-checked, but the story casts the spell of *I, Claudius.* With each book that followed—*Shah of Shahs, The Soccer War, Imperium, Another Day of Life*—his reputation and readership grew, though more rapidly in Europe than in this country.

Kapuściński's new book, *The Shadow of the Sun,* has the feel of outtakes from four decades of reporting on Africa: a scattering of fragments set everywhere from Zanzibar in the early sixties to Uganda in the eighties to Liberia in the nineties. As always, the question of method and factuality arises—have these stories been sitting in a drawer all these years? were they recast for this book?—and Kapuściński, providing no notes or sources, does not answer it. The book defies chronological or geographical coherence; there is scarcely any context for these sketches. On one page we're in an alley in Lagos in 1967; on the next we're in Mauritania at no discernible time; a few pages later it's central Ethiopia in the mid-seventies. In a bar in northern Uganda, while sharing a reed to sip from a pitcher of local beer, Kapuściński suddenly mentions fear of AIDS, and another decade has gone by. One story typically begins, at

George Packer is the author of *The Village of Waiting* and, most recently, *Blood of the Liberals.*

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no particular time or place, "In the darkness, I suddenly spotted two glaring lights," and is never quite completed. Often the narrator is in transit, negotiating bad roads and ambushes and water buffalo herds, but his destination is seldom reached and his purpose remains obscure. Although Kapuściński writes in a preface, "This is therefore not a book about Africa, but rather about some people from there—about encounters with them, and time spent together," few individual Africans step forward from the mass and become characters in their own right, with names and histories. (At the outset the author apologizes for the "gross simplification" of the term "the African," only to fall back on it again and again.)

Then what kind of book is this? Not history or journalism, though we get brief accounts of the career of Idi Amin and the Rwandan genocide and the Liberian civil war. Not travel literature, since the journey is never sustained for more than a few pages. Not memoir, since we learn nothing about the narrator's own life beyond the fact that to work in Africa was his "lifelong dream." Not a novel, lacking as it does characters and plot. Its original Polish title is *Heban,* or "ebony," which suggests something like a meditation on the condition of Africanness, if not blackness. And in an entirely unsystematic, impressionistic way, this is what Kapuściński attempts: a roaming personal anthropology, fueled by curiosity, sparked by chance encounters, tending toward philosophical reflection, of a place that he finds irresistible.

The natural motion of Kapuściński's thought takes him from a recollection of the most viscerally physical sensations—he never lets you forget that living in Africa means constant discomfort, stupefying heat ("as if a meteorite were passing in the vicinity"), fragrant and putrid smells, swarming flies, appallingly ordinary sights of human misery—straight to a metaphysical examination of what is constant in the spirit of the place and people. Upon entering Rwanda, he writes, "You will always have the same impression of stepping through the gates of a stronghold that rises up before you, fashioned from immense, magnificent mountains." The observation of a closed landscape leads effortlessly to the larger truth, entirely against the grain of current thought, that "our world, seemingly global, is in reality a planet of thousands of the most varied and never intersecting provinces. A trip around the world is a journey from backwater to backwater, each of which considers itself, in its isolation, a shining star." The book gleams with these flashes of insight.

Kapuściński's descriptive power, too, is evidenced throughout *The Shadow of the Sun.* In one early scene, he has collapsed exhausted on a cot in a hut in the middle of the Serengeti Plain, taking a break from an arduous drive, when he realizes that he's about to put his cigarette out on the head of an Egyptian cobra lying coiled and cataleptic beneath him. He freezes. His companion hurries to fetch a sharp-edged metal canister from the car, and together they bring it down with all their weight on the snake.

> I never suspected there could be so much power within a single creature. Such terrifying, monstrous, cosmic power. I had assumed that the canister's edge would cut easily through the snake—nothing of the kind! I now saw we had beneath us not a snake, but a throbbing, vibrating, steel spring, impossible to either break or crush. The cobra was thrashing and pounding the ground with such demented fury that the hut's interior grew dark from the dust. Under the powerful blows of its tail, the clay floor was crumbling and scattering, blinding us with clouds of debris. . . . Finally, but this took a long time, an eternity, the cobra's blows started to lose their impetus, vigor, frequency. "Look," Leo said. "Blood." . . . The cobra was weakening, and the vibrations of the canister, which we felt the whole time and by means of which the snake signaled us about her pain and her hatred, vibrations that terrified and panicked us, were also diminishing. But now, when it was all over, when Leo and I rose and the dust began to settle and thin out and I gazed down again at the narrow ribbon of blood being quickly absorbed, instead of satisfaction and joy I felt an emptiness inside, and something else as well: I felt sad that that heart, which inhabited the very pit of hell we had all shared through a bizarre coincidence only a moment ago, that that heart had stopped beating.

From lassitude to explosion: in Kapuściński's Africa, nature is "inflated, unbridled, hysterically exaggerated," and human beings exert

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themselves to the limits of endurance simply to survive. Out of these moments of extreme physical pressure that strip human civilization to its essentials, an African metaphysics emerges. Time isn't linear but cyclical, not measured in hours and minutes but by actions. History doesn't exist outside of human retelling, and stories retold shade into myth. Night comes so swift and total that the omnipresence of spirits commands belief; outside the logic they themselves represent there are no explanations of cause and effect. Solitary human life has no meaning. There is only social experience, and evil, guilt, and redemption are not internal psychic phenomena but events played out by the collective: "In the African tradition, the conflicts and drama of Raskolnikov are an impossibility." The great shaping forces aren't reason and progress but nature and imagination. Africa "exists for itself alone, within itself, a timeless, sealed, separate continent."

This kind of thinking, bordering on mysticism, is a common and understandable response to a place that leaves most Westerners physically and psychically overwhelmed. Nor is it enough to answer with the easy charge of racism and leave it at that, for as anyone who's lived in Africa knows, there's some truth to Kapuściński's mental picture: people and things work differently there, and to assume otherwise is to come to grief. But *The Shadow of the Sun* makes the limits of its usefulness quite clear. For after all, Africa is no more sealed off than any other place; it is part of the world.

As the book nears an end and we enter Africa's recent history, the most monstrous aggressors aren't cobras or thunderstorms or droughts but human beings themselves, committing unspeakable crimes against other human beings. Look at a map of Africa: the countries that haven't seen large-scale slaughter in the past two decades are in the minority. When hundreds of Nigerians die in religious violence, it barely rates an item in the *New York Times*'s "World Briefing."

Why does Africa continue to be so tortured when large parts of the world have begun to put civil war and mass poverty behind them? This is one of the truly pressing questions of our time, or at least it should be. At different points Kapuściński ventures one explanation or another—competition for scarce land and water, the slave mentality, the disasters of colonialism, blind folly. When Liberia's sergeant-president Samuel Doe drives through the streets of Monrovia and straight into the hands of rebel soldiers determined to torture him to death, he seems to be in the grip of sheer idiocy. But in the end, Kapuściński can't answer the question because he doesn't believe that history acts in Africa as it does elsewhere. In this "timeless, sealed, separate continent," history strikes with all the fury and randomness of a tropical storm. "History in these parts appears suddenly, descends like deus ex machina, reaps its bloody harvest, seizes its prey, and disappears," he writes. "What exactly is it? Why has it chosen us to cast its evil eye upon? It is better not to think about it. Better not to pry."

Even (or especially) when pondering Africa's most extreme and highly organized case of human cruelty, the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Kapuściński resorts to a supernatural teleology: "And so even if the number of victims was not one million, but, let us say, just one, would it not be proof enough that the devil is among us, and that in the spring of 1994 he just happened to be in Rwanda?" Kapuściński's account is not one of those glib long-distance shrugs that concludes, "Ancient tribal hatred—who can understand it?" He explains the origins of Rwanda's feudal caste system and describes its destruction at independence when Hutus took power after killing thousands of Tutsis. Nonetheless, in some ways what he offers is not a satisfying history. For example, in his telling, Belgian colonizers "enter the picture" only in the 1950s, as patrons of the Hutus, when in fact they had instituted Rwanda's destructive ethnic division with a system of national identity cards decades earlier.

It's not as though Kapuściński sets out to wipe the slate clean of colonial influences. Throughout the book, he doesn't hesitate to condemn the European presence, from the early "robbers, soldiers of fortune, adventurers, criminals, slave traders" to the latter-day superpowers leaving behind acres of rusting military hardware. In fact, Kapuściński has no coherent historical view of the events he witnesses—which is why at the end of his lecture on Rwanda he gives up on analysis, equates one death with one million, and concludes that the devil "just hap-

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pened" to appear in Rwanda in 1994. Better not to pry. Africa's otherness is too great. Which leaves open the question of just how responsible non-Africans are for what happens there, and suggests that the question is probably unanswerable, or at any rate less urgent.

A historical view would run counter to Kapuściński's sense of the condition of Africanness. His Africa is "eternal abiding," which means that "the notion of development does not exist." Rapacious, linear-minded Europeans arrive, and then several hundred years later they leave. Africa remains what it has always been. The book's final image—an elephant mysteriously strolling through a dinner party out in the Tanzanian bush at midnight, "his glance gimletlike, strangely piercing"—is meant to represent Africa's gigantic, enigmatic, unconquerable spirit. A stunning image, like so many others in *The Shadow of the Sun*. But what does it mean to assert that a continent has an unconquerable spirit? That it is immune to history and incapable of change?

In recent years millions of Africans have left their villages forever and lost themselves in makeshift swarming cities: a drama as great as colonialism, war, or revolution, and one in which Africans choose to step outside their eternal role and enter time. In this vast movement of peoples, Africans who have always been acted upon by history start to become actors. It's a drama of individual volition and desire as well as collective catastrophe. Kapuściński alludes to it—but his mind always runs from the strange and overwhelming physical moment to the highest plane of abstraction, where Africa is "eternal abiding." He doesn't seem interested in individuals and their stories, except as emblems: the African. And whereas an African can change, *the* African cannot. The African walking out of Eritrea south into Ethiopia "smiles the smile of a man who knows many things or who, in any event, knows one thing: that for him there are no boundaries here in Africa, and no states—there is only the burned earth, on which brother seeks brother."

No doubt there's more to this nameless man's story, but we leave him before particulars emerge. Instead of wading into journalism Kapuściński remains in poetry, where for four decades he has written beautifully about Africa. The stories of Africans remain to be written.

Dung, Diet, and Art

THE GANG:
COLERIDGE, THE HUTCHINSONS
& THE WORDSWORTHS IN 1802
By John Worthen. Yale University Press. $30.

Reviewed by CRISTINA NEHRING

William Wordsworth was not a man to doubt his own merits. "He says he does not see much difficulty in writing like Shakespeare, if he had a mind to try it," Charles Lamb told a friend in 1808. "Nothing," Lamb added, "is wanting but the mind."

While Wordsworth's reputation with the general public soared—he became poet laureate in the latter part of his life and lived to see the very chairs he sat on declared sacred—Lamb's skepticism was echoed by some of the harder heads of his time. William Hazlitt considered Wordsworth's success an accident of history. "Had he lived in any other period . . . he would never have been heard of. As it is, he has some difficulty to contend with the hebetude of his intellect." Twenty-nine years after Wordsworth's death, Matthew Arnold considered him a "relic," his verse "a tissue of elevated but abstract verbiage alien to the very nature of poetry."

Some of Wordsworth's most famous passages can indeed strike the modern reader as naggingly cloudy, their profundity insisted upon by emphatic adjectives and amorphous nouns rather than embodied in any concrete image or thought. Consider the passage from "Tintern Abbey" that biographer Stephen Gill singles out for particular admiration:

> I have felt
> A *presence* that disturbs me with the joy
> Of *elevated thoughts;* a *sense sublime*
> Of *something* far more *deeply interfused*
> Whose *dwelling* is the light of setting suns . . .
> A *motion* and a *spirit,* that impels

Cristina Nehring is a writer who teaches literature at UCLA and Université de Paris XIII. Her essays have appeared in *Harper's* and *The Atlantic.*

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> *All thinking things, all objects* of *all thought,*
> And rolls through *all things.*

All these lines convey is a hazy and hyperbolic high-mindedness (the italics are mine). Everything is "elevated," but little is articulated. Is this the "emotion recollected in tranquillity" to which Wordsworth famously traced great poetry in his 1800 *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*? Maybe so, but emotion must be experienced before it is recollected. And there's an argument to be made that—in life and work—Wordsworth's recollections eclipse his experience.

It would be too simple to claim that poetry reflects biography. On the other hand, it would be fruitless to claim the opposite. Poems do not come from air and ether, but from lives. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge, who regularly address each other by name in their verse. And to no one is it more evident than to modern literary biographers, who, coaxed by curiosity or nudged by the New Historicism, prove ever more eager to explore the effect of context on text. As early as 1975, Mark L. Reed gave the world two hefty *Chronologies* of Wordsworth's life—books that record, item by item, day by day, all that could be discovered of Wordsworth's activities for forty-five of his eighty years. There have been several more conventional biographies since. But no biographer has yet followed the new historical impulse so far as University of Nottingham professor John Worthen. *The Gang* focuses not only on one or two "privileged" writers, but on an entire *group* engaged, in some capacity, in the production of literature. Worthen takes for his subject, moreover, a single year in the lives of the members of this group, the better to provide all known detail, for if, as he says, "we miss things on the grounds that they are unimportant, or we have no space for them, or because they do not fit the story we are trying to tell, then all we do is conceal our prejudices."

But prejudices die hard, and Worthen's book is no death blow. For one thing, his project is hardly as "democratic" as he hopes: in some sense, it represents the very pinnacle of literary hagiography. It is the modern equivalent of blessing the chair Wordsworth sat on. We are "blessing" Mary Hutchinson, Dorothy Wordsworth, their maid, and their manure deliverer, not because we have the slightest interest in them for their own sake, but because they have "touched" the sacred Wordsworth. Far from exploding the elitism of classic biographies, such a biography expands it: it draws the halo of its subject bigger and wider. The literary scholar who records an author's every meal and maid differs little from the medieval churchman who collected bones of the saints and splinters from the cross. Both are idolaters.

But what does a biography such as Worthen's reveal about the interconnection of life and art? Can any biography shed light on the peculiar emotional vagueness of Wordsworth's poetry?

An examination of Wordsworth's life tosses up a great deal more "tranquillity" than "emotion." Born in 1770, he grew up in a prosperous family in the English Lake District, attended and left Cambridge without distinction, traveled to France to marvel at the beginnings of the revolution, fathered a child with an adoring French girl whom he promised to marry, and abandoned her (physically and financially) for the next ten years. Upon returning to England, he rented a nine-bedroom mansion near Coleridge, where he lived with his sister, Dorothy, who had become his full-time companion.

"Come, my love, my husband," Annette Vallon writes in 1793,

> and receive the tender embraces of your wife, of your daughter. . . . She grows more like you every day. I seem to be holding you in my arms. Her little heart often beats against my own; I seem to feel her father's. . . .

It is hard to imagine how Wordsworth could have abandoned so soulful a lover on whom he had inflicted so hard a fate. But he did, and for all his literary defense of "powerful feeling" in the years that followed, there is no sign that it took the smallest emotional toll. Indeed, according to his doting sister in 1797, the two of them were "as happy as human beings can be."

Not that Worthen tells us this. His subject is only the year 1802. The prehistory is dispatched rapidly, and the reader gets no sense at all of the relationship with Annette that precedes Worthen's narrative. What is worse is that we don't get any sense of what happened between them in 1802 either—and this although Worthen selected the year in good part because

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of Annette. In 1802, Wordsworth saw her for the first time since 1792; he met her in the French border town of Calais in the company (as usual) of his sister, and he told her he was marrying someone else. Indeed, he bought a wedding ring while on the visit. These are the two main events of 1802 for Wordsworth—the visit to Annette in August, and the wedding to Mary Hutchinson in October. Unfortunately we learn little about either. For all the detail about dung and diet in Worthen's book, his accounts of major life events are extraordinarily thin.

The fault is not only his. For if Worthen inclines to minimize information damaging to Wordsworth (as he does, despite his protestations of objectivity), he is greatly assisted in this repression by the poet himself—and by his sister. The few August entries in the journal that Dorothy kept continuously through the year 1802 comment, maddeningly, on the landscape and on hotel life. Wordsworth himself wrote political sonnets on the trip. There is a single sonnet about his daughter; lyrical, but also, one can't help thinking, cozily self-vindicating. "It Is a Beauteous Evening" describes a "tranquil" walk with the child he has abandoned, in which he tells her: "Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year. . . . God being with thee when we know it not" (and when Wordsworth *himself* is not with her). Poetically, he seems to be supplying the girl with two surrogate fathers to excuse his own absence from her life.

These are the only contemporaneous documents that address the visit to Annette. Worthen does not have much to hearken to, then—but what he has, he hears with a tin ear and assesses with a tin heart. Annette is imagined as "doubtless" having gossiped energetically with Wordsworth about politics, and having been thrilled that he allowed her to keep the daughter he had never seen before. This is a bizarre moment in Worthen's historical reconstruction: he speculates that the main reason for Wordsworth's visit was graciously to assuage Annette's fears that he might become too possessive of Caroline—he, who for ten years had shown no interest in her.

The second reason Worthen cites for the trip is equally misleading: "to reassure her of his continuing [financial] responsibility." In fact, Wordsworth biographers are unanimous in concluding that Wordsworth provided no financial assistance to Annette whatsoever until that point. On innumerable other occasions Worthen chastises his fellow biographers for not thoroughly substantiating points that, frankly, are obvious. One example: after telling us that on the eve of Wordsworth's marriage Dorothy slept with his future wife's wedding ring on her finger, and quoting from her journal that during the ceremony she "could stand it no longer and threw [her]self on the bed . . . neither hearing nor seeing anything"—after all that, he tells us, coolly, that "there is no evidence" that the marriage left Dorothy "distraught." And yet in the matter of finances, where there really is no evidence, he speculates wildly: "It seems unlikely that—poor as the Wordsworths were in these years—Wordsworth had failed to send money when he could." Unlikely from a moral standpoint—but more than likely from a factual one.

Wordsworth did receive a large settlement from an outstanding court case around the time he went to Calais, so it is possible that at this time he gave a portion to his French family. He then returned to England, and distressed Dorothy by marrying his school friend Mary Hutchinson. Worthen returns to Annette only once. In October, she wrote the Wordsworths a letter. Unhappily, according to Worthen, it arrived "too late to congratulate on the wedding, too early to congratulate on the expected child, though both events," he adds in one of his more stunning understatements, "would have been intensely interesting to her."

Biographers seek their subjects for a reason. In some respects Worthen and Wordsworth seem well matched. If there is such a mass of nostalgia for childhood emotion in Wordsworth's poetry, perhaps it is not because his youth was so exuberant, but because his adult life was so circumscribed. If the images of "powerful feeling" are more emphatic than persuasive, fuzzier than they are fertile, perhaps this, too, has a root in biography. Wordsworth scholars are often at pains to account for the transition from Wordsworth the impassioned young revolutionary to Wordsworth the arrogant, steely poet laureate who called universal suffrage a "greater political crime than any in recorded history," damned his brother for marrying "beneath him," and was "incapable," according to Coleridge, "of being in love." Perhaps the transition was less sharp than his votaries would like to believe.

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Weird Science

THE SHATTERED SELF:
THE END OF NATURAL EVOLUTION
By Pierre Baldi. MIT Press. $24.95.

Reviewed by AARON E. HIRSH

In psychoanalysis, the deepest truths about a patient may be revealed by what he most vehemently denies. Strangely, the same principle seems to apply to Pierre Baldi's new book, *The Shattered Self: The End of Natural Evolution.* As Baldi describes the book's ambitious itinerary, plotted to lead him along the frontiers of contemporary biology and computer science, he vows that although he may venture to the farthest outposts of today's boldest disciplines, and even scale a few watchtowers to contemplate "several examples slightly ahead in the future," he will never wander too far into the dark and undiscovered country beyond. "No science fiction here," he insists. For the purpose he has in mind is more serious than flighty speculation about the bizarre places biology and computer science might lead, and therefore he adds special emphasis when he asserts that "the essence of this book is not about predictions." It is not merely to leer at the local inhabitants and let them play on his imagination that he will travel the borderlands of human cloning, genetic engineering, artificial life and intelligence. No, he will explore these strange lands because they "raise profound and troubling questions about the nature and boundaries of life, intelligence, and who we really are."

Perhaps naïvely, or at least optimistically, I took Baldi's fervent denials at face value. For the truth is that there is a very important book waiting to be written—a book that will help us understand what contemporary biology and computer science mean to a carefully considered philosophy of identity. And although Baldi's rhetoric seemed a tad hyperbolic, I thought this was the project he was embarking on when he wrote that "our notions of self, life and death, intelligence, and sexuality are very primitive and on the verge of being profoundly altered on the scale of human history. It is this shattering—what causes it and its meaning—that forms the central thread of this book." My hope that this philosophical agenda might actually be followed stemmed in part from the sense that Baldi was well positioned to write the book that is waiting to be written. He has made significant contributions to bioinformatics (the field of biology that uses computers to make sense of the data generated by large-scale biological investigations, such as genome sequencing projects), and he works alongside eminent professors of evolution and genetics at the University of California, Irvine. Perhaps he would be the one, I thought, to reflect carefully, and with a deep understanding of the science, upon the potential implications of today's discoveries for our conception of ourselves. It was therefore not only with dismay at the introduction's pledges violated, but also with disappointment at the book's promise unfulfilled, that I encountered passages such as this one:

> In general, we could learn how to select and modify multiple genes to produce genomes with a higher potential for greater intelligence. In time, we could progressively create new beings—not necessarily Homo sapiens—with higher forms of intelligence. . . . We could clone Einstein, and his parents, siblings, and friends if we wanted to re-create some of his environment. We could raise 1000 Newtons with 1000 Einsteins and/or let them work together.

Is this some kind of thought experiment, a cautionary homily, or the earnest proposal of a bioinformatician gone bananas? If homily, the scenario probably ought not to appear so promising. On the other hand, if thought experiment, it probably ought to be followed by some thought, which it is not. Instead, it is succeeded by further wild supposition, inspired by the wonders of molecular biology and computer science. (Just to be clear about the science: cloning Einstein is indeed feasible, and it would indeed yield an infant with the great physicist's genome. However, raising this infant

Aaron E. Hirsh is a Fellow at the Center for Computational Genetics and Biological Modeling at Stanford University.

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with clones of Einstein's friends would certainly not bring back the gifted man with bad hair. As you might surmise—even without a background in bioinformatics—we have not the slightest idea what such an infant would become, but I'd expect a rather resentful teenager with very complicated Oedipal issues.) If not intended as forewarning, and certainly not functioning as thought experiment, what is the strange reverie with which this book overflows? My own best guess is that Baldi's imagination, inspired by the power of his own discipline, was finally unleashed under the pretext of careful reflection upon questions of identity. This interpretation would at least explain why so many of the weirder prophecies are related with a kind of breathless excitement and are followed not by analyses of their meaning but by a litany of gee-whiz interrogatives, such as, "And what about Siamese twins controlling one hand each? Could they ever become a very skillful surgeon, performing separation surgery on other Siamese twins?" Or, elsewhere, "How would you feel if you were surrounded by thousands of single, Siamese twin, and Siamese triplet clones of yourself?" It would seem that somewhere along the frontier, Baldi swerved into the undiscovered country and let his imagination run wild.

If there is an idea to which Baldi returns each time he emerges from the wilderness of prophecy, it is that the possibility of creating novel life forms will force us to see ourselves within a continuum of potential organisms, rather than as distinct beings separated from other creatures by vast gaps of nonexistence. Although I do not necessarily disagree with this point, an idea that seems to me to hit our self-image much harder is that we are linked to all of life not just by the conceivable organisms that our descendants might one day choose to design, but by the actual organisms that were our ancestors. And this idea, of course, was articulated quite clearly in 1859, when Charles Darwin wrote that "according to the theory of natural selection an interminable number of intermediate forms must have existed, linking together all the species in each group by gradations as fine as our existing varieties."

To be fair, there are not many ideas in biology that are invulnerable to the charge that Darwin said it better. And when Baldi leaves the lands of Siamese surgeons and Einstein house parties,

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setting out for the frontiers of computer science, he takes the idea of continuity in a more novel direction. He argues that as computers become more powerful, and the interface between our minds and our computers grows more seamless and comfortable, we generate a larger, continuous system of information processing, in which our minds become less discrete and bounded. Unlike his forays beyond biology, this bearing leads Baldi to a number of questions that not only seem profound, but may also be endemic to the borderlands of information technology—that is, they may be investigated only with the help of concepts and approaches developed by contemporary computer science. One such question, for example, is whether artificial life—a program that reproduces itself and evolves on a computer—is fundamentally different from organic life in that it has separable hardware and software. Another is how emotions might figure in the enormous information-processing capacity of the human mind. These are questions worth contemplating. With careful reflection, one might write a very good book about them.

Over the last twenty years, historians of science have made the point that science is shaped by the social and cultural context from which it emerges. Scientists have sometimes resisted this idea, as it seemed to threaten the legitimacy or integrity of their results. As I close this book, however, my strongest impression is that scientists ought to see context not as a threat, but rather as a necessity. When experimental results are divorced from the question they were intended to address, or even the social and intellectual context in which they were generated, the work can appear capricious and grotesque. It is true, as Baldi reports, that a fruit fly has been experimentally engineered to exhibit eyes where it should not. This, however, was done to demonstrate something specific about the developmental pathway of eyes. It was not—at least, I hope it was not—an act of whimsy or scientific showboating. But in the absence of context, that is precisely what it seems. In the same way, when a scientist reveals wild dreams about where his discipline is headed, but forgoes a careful consideration of the social context in which research will operate, the scenarios can seem inscrutable, arbitrary, and perhaps better reserved for further private reflection.

The Big Bang

THE METAPHYSICAL CLUB:
A STORY OF IDEAS IN AMERICA
By Louis Menand. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $27.

Reviewed by CASEY NELSON BLAKE

After Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., died in 1935—three years after his retirement from the Supreme Court and two days short of his ninety-fourth birthday—two of his Union army uniforms were found in his closet. Pinned to them was a note that read, "These uniforms were worn by me in the Civil War and the stains upon them are my blood." Holmes's experience of the world's first modern war not only stained his clothes; it also turned him against abstract idealisms of the sort that he believed had caused his father's generation to endorse a fanatical abolitionism. Embracing Darwin's account of a universe in flux, Holmes came to believe that the best antidote to the absolutist claims of certainty that had led the nation into war was a sober recognition of the limited, culture-bound nature of all knowledge. The first sentence of his first law review article revealed the distance that separated him from antebellum intellectuals: "It is the merit of the common law that it decides the case first and determines the principle afterwards."

In 1872, Holmes joined the philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, along with other like-minded Cambridge intellectuals, to form the Metaphysical Club, a discussion group that explored the consequences of the Darwinian revolution for epistemology. What Holmes, Peirce, and James—and their disciple John Dewey—had in common, writes Louis Menand in his new book, "was not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas."

> They all believed that ideas are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like

Casey Nelson Blake, director of the American Studies program at Columbia University, is the author of *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford.*

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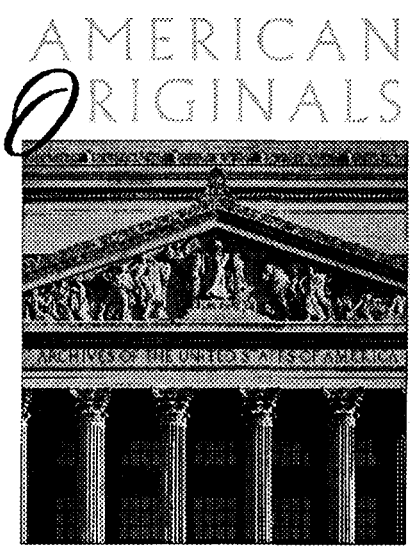
forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals—that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability.

The intent of this conception of knowledge was to "make it harder for people to be driven to violence by their beliefs," Menand writes. Beyond that, it was a daring venture to replace timeless principles with experimental methods, comprehensible procedures, and open participation in decision making as the legitimating creed for democratic institutions.

Menand is a believer in what might be called the Big Bang theory of history. He shows how this single, explosive "idea about ideas" unleashed a cultural shock wave that transformed the natural sciences; the curricula for higher and secondary education; Americans' understandings of race, ethnicity, and nationality; and the constitutional defense of civil liberties. The Protestant middle and upper classes, especially, were energized by John Dewey's call for an instrumental, or practical, philosophy addressing "the problems of men," and they took to the streets in a crusade that defined modern liberalism from the Progressive era to the Vietnam war. Menand is exactly right when he claims that "we are still living, to a great extent, in a country these thinkers helped to make."

This book by an English professor is history in the grand style, and it treats what is perhaps the single great theme in American intellectual life since the Civil War. In addition to Holmes, Peirce, James, and Dewey, Menand directs a host of supporting characters, from Louis Agassiz and Jane Addams to Alain Locke and Randolph Bourne. In showing how ideas mattered in the lives of the individuals who expounded them, and in the collective life of an industrializing nation, Menand proves himself a master intellectual biographer. Very little of his story will come as news to specialists. The emergence of a pragmatist modernism from the ashes of transcendentalist idealism has long been a pre-



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occupation of intellectual historians. Yet whatever his indebtedness to previous scholars, Menand's artful retelling of this story does make new claims for the significance of pragmatism. By opening with Holmes's agonies during the Civil War, Menand boldly inserts pragmatism into the heart of this country's national narrative and insists on its centrality to modern American history. He does so, moreover, in a writing style whose grace demonstrates that "theorizing" about complex ideas does not require a crash course in obscurantism. Style is substance, in this instance. Menand's generous authorial voice invites the reader to enter into the lively public argument that his subjects believed was the essence of democracy.

But as the deconstructionists taught us long ago, it's always worth probing even the most open and welcoming of philosophies for unacknowledged exclusions and silences. In the case of *The Metaphysical Club*, these take two forms: first, a failure to engage seriously the critics of pragmatism who wrote from all sides of the political spectrum from World War I through the Cold War; and second, the absence of any discussion of those figures in the pragmatist community who formulated a sustained critique of free-market political economy. Unlike James Kloppenberg in *Uncertain Victory* (1986) and Robert Westbrook in *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991), Menand sees no need to wrestle with pragmatism's toughest critics and ignores the ideologically charged historiographical debates surrounding the Progressive politics it spawned.

This is not to say that Menand is uncritical in his account of pragmatism's founding fathers. He concedes that pragmatism "takes interests for granted; it doesn't provide for a way of judging whether they are worth pursuing apart from the consequences of acting on them. We form beliefs to get what we want, but where do we get our wants?" The full significance of this "deficiency" seems not to register in Menand's interpretation, however. It was precisely this failure to explain the genesis of new values that led Dewey's student, the brilliant cultural critic Randolph Bourne, to declare during World War I that "a philosophy upon which I had relied to carry us through no longer works." An international catastrophe like the war demanded that intellectuals act as "value-creators." And it was here, Bourne bitterly concluded, that pragmatism came up short.

Bourne was not alone in this critique. Catholics and other religious thinkers at the turn of the century insisted that a culture without foundations in faith would drift into moral chaos. Other conservative intellectuals similarly condemned a secular-pragmatist culture for its moral relativism. On the left, Lewis Mumford, Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, and C. Wright Mills were among the many radical intellectuals who followed Bourne in arguing that instrumentalism had elevated a cult of efficiency and technology over humanistic values.

Mid-century liberals had their own quarrel with pragmatism. The pragmatist idea of a "social self"—an identity forged in interaction with its natural and social environments—inspired Progressives' proposals for sweeping social reforms intended to remake American culture and personality alike. But by the late 1930s, liberals witnessed the consequences in Europe and the USSR of schemes for the creation of the New Aryan Man or the New Socialist Man and came to believe that human freedom resided in that part of the self that lay "beyond culture," in Lionel Trilling's memorable words. Not surprisingly, pragmatism had little to offer liberals in search of a refuge from culture, and these thinkers found their sustenance elsewhere—in existentialism, psychoanalysis, and theological neo-orthodoxy. Menand attributes the midcentury eclipse of the pragmatists' reputation to the Cold War, another "war over principles," but the reaction against the perceived moral thinness of pragmatism had set in before 1945, even among liberals. Menand does the men he admires no favor by sheltering them from their critics' attacks.

Finally, there is the issue of politics, and it is here that *The Metaphysical Club* is as valuable as a document of our own time as it is as a history of pragmatism and its consequences. Menand sees the political effects of his Big Bang primarily in the early-twentieth-century reckoning with ethno-racial diversity and the defense of free speech. These are monumental achievements, of course, but back when a robust popular liberalism was still a going concern, historians looked elsewhere to assess the political consequences of the pragmatist revolution. They

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understood that there was a connection between a pragmatist intellectual culture, on the one hand, and Robert La Follette's "Wisconsin Experiment" and the gritty New York liberalism that anticipated the New Deal on the other; and they sought in that culture a window on the ideological origins of the modern welfare state. That story is nowhere in evidence here.

It may be unfair to ask more of a book that covers so much ground, but its author's reticence obscures an important issue. Menand takes pains to place his heroes in the context of the Civil War, but neglects the equally important context of the transatlantic debate on the relationships among pragmatism, corporate capitalism, and the modern liberal state—once the most compelling issue for historians of this subject. In that debate, Marxists, Populists, and Social Gospelers pressed hard against the Anglo-American fetish of laissez faire and limited government. They found allies of a sort among the college students who followed Dewey's summons into social science and social work, and among middle-class intellectuals like the editors of the *New Republic*, who thought pragmatism authorized the state to undertake creative solutions to mass suffering and powerlessness. Some of the work those Progressives accomplished no doubt limited the ability of corporations to impose their will on the general population; other reforms seem, in retrospect, to have enhanced the power of professionals and experts at the expense of ordinary citizens.

There is no pragmatic reason why a recovery of pragmatism for a new century needs to rehearse old questions. Every generation writes the usable past it needs, and a generation that sees no horizon beyond today's market fundamentalism may be weary of the old debates about capitalism, socialism, and democracy. But before joining in the applause for the pragmatist revival in which Menand has played such an admirable role, one needs to look carefully at the history discarded in books like *The Metaphysical Club*, as well as the legacy reclaimed. A pragmatism cut loose from its historic roots in social-democratic aspiration may energize the academy with the promise of cultural innovation, while producing only the faintest echo in civic life. One name for that popgun burst is neoliberalism.

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Jack Hannah in ***You Will Not Taste Death: Jesus and Epicureanism*** recognizes the notes as chronologically ordered and correlative with the skeletal history used in the *Gospel of Mark*. He provides all the text of *Thomas* with comments and Marcan context, thereby retrieving a narrative of Jesus that is tenably historical.

This *historical* Jesus based his teaching on the Epicurean philosophy, not on Judaism with its fasting, praying, almsgiving, and obeying food laws. This *historical* Jesus said, "Tell no lie and never do what you hate." This *historical* Jesus never mentioned a devil, demons, or hell. Epicureanism also shaped Jesus' thought that God and Caesar are man-made authorities and that one's ultimate authority should be oneself.

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Off the Beat

LIVING WITH MUSIC:
RALPH ELLISON'S JAZZ WRITINGS
Edited by Robert G. O'Meally.
Modern Library, $25.

Reviewed by DAVID HAJDU

Record companies are surely the masters of commodification through creative assemblage. Once it's recorded and archived on tape (or digital media), all music becomes inventory, packageable in endless variations. The more popular the musician, the higher the demand for new "product"; the smaller the artist's body of work, the greater the need for repackaging. As a result, the cohesive albums Frank Sinatra recorded for Capitol Records in his prime have long been mined to make "new" collections of Sinatra songs, and Louis Armstrong's seminal Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings, all of which would fit neatly on two CDs, have been released in dozens of nominally different editions.

Living with Music would seem a literary parallel. The fourth book published under Ralph Ellison's name since the author's death in 1994, it brings together twenty-four essays, interviews, letters, and excerpts from works of fiction. Most of the pieces appear in at least one other book—seven of the twelve chapters collected under the "nonfiction" heading are in the indispensable anthology *Shadow and Act,* as well as in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison;* of the other five, one is a question-and-answer session conducted by the writer and literary scholar Ron Welburn, which properly belongs in *Living with Music*'s "Interviews" section; one is a transcription of a speech about the classical musician William L. Dawson that Ellison improvised "from the head"; and two of the remaining three have little to do with jazz, their subjects being flamenco music and the blues influence in the fiction of Richard Wright. In addition, there are three excerpts from Ellison's masterpiece, *Invisible Man,* that touch upon jazz themes; a couple of music-oriented short fictions apparently written for the novel posthumously issued as *Juneteenth,* but not included in the published text; and some letters and interviews. The book is a mishmash, in short, and a mistitled one, not entirely about jazz or strictly composed of "writings."

That it holds up as a book is a testament to Ellison's tenacity of vision and to editor Robert O'Meally's skill at interpretive annotation. Author of a lucid study of Ellison's work, *The Craft of Ralph Ellison,* professor of comparative literature at Columbia, and founder of the university's Center for Jazz Studies, O'Meally knows his Ellison and his jazz, and he explores their shared ground with sure footing. Because of "its insistence on individuality of sound (something not sought in symphony players) and on the capacity to swing with and against one's fellow players; its accents on improvisation and readiness for changes; and its connections with the comedy laced with tragedy that defines the blues," O'Meally writes in his introduction, "jazz is a musical language that reminds us what and where we are as U.S. citizens."

Such is the language of Ralph Ellison's literature as well. To be American is to be part of the black experience—whatever one's race, whatever the part one plays and however passive that part may be; so argues Ellison, explicitly in his nonfiction and interviews, and more persuasively in the resonant universality of his fiction. For Ellison, this proposition is axiomatic and scarcely negates the legitimacy of European traditions; it merely positions them in geographic and historical perspective (the "where" in O'Meally's phrase) as foreign: by definition, not American.

A music major at Tuskegee Institute, Ellison was a classical trumpet player who could hold his own in a jazz band, as he recalled in a rambling, cordial interview conducted by O'Meally in 1976. Then he discovered "The Waste Land." "There was nothing to do but look up the references in the footnotes to the poem," he said, "and thus began my conscious education in literature." Ellison saw parity in the arts of jazz

David Hajdu is the author of *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn* and *Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Fariña, and Richard Fariña.* He teaches at New School University, New York City.

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and poetry: "Consider that at least as early as T. S. Eliot's creation of a new aesthetic for poetry through the artful juxtapositioning of earlier styles, Louis Armstrong, way down the river in New Orleans, was working out a similar technique for jazz." (Eliot, for his part, made overt use of music as a structural resource at least once, with "Four Quartets.") Ellison's attention shifted to literature, although he would never wholly abandon music, sometimes taking a break from the typewriter to play the horn alone in his bedroom.

Ellison would always write a bit like the versatile working trumpeter he once was. You can hear a classically trained musician's devotion to purity of tone in the clarity of his language, and there's no mistaking the lilting swing of his phrasing. His best prose also has the seemingly casual limberness of virtuoso improvisation, despite his painstaking working methods: he would revise obsessively toward the end of evoking spontaneity. (John Barth studied orchestration at Juilliard and went on to devise fiction absorbed with structure and cross-references; Anthony Burgess composed idiosyncratic symphonies before writing his dense and thorny novels. Still, one should probably not make too much of these parallels. Nabokov, among the most lyrical of writers, professed to have no ear for music, and Paul Bowles's tentative early work as a classical composer has little in common with his assured fiction.)

"Music gives resonance to memory," Ellison wrote in an essay about the mythic provenance of bebop, the after-hours jam sessions at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem. In *Living with Music*, Ellison's memory gives resonance to the music in his life and work. Some of the most compelling moments in the book (after the fiction excerpts) are the fleeting passages of episodic narrative memoir, riffs that occur here and there both in essays and in interviews. In one, the writer briefly recalls his years as an avid dancer in the Harlem ballrooms. A child of the swing era, he felt betrayed by the "miserable noise" of bebop, he said, because it undermined the "supportive rite" of dance. Of course! A novelist of such grace, vigor, sophistication, and flair just had to be a lindyhopper!

Like his contempt for bebop (the style now codified as mainstream jazz), some of Ellison's opinions run dramatically counter to prevailing winds in the music world today. He rejected Afrocentrism in jazz criticism, noting that "this argument about who did what and who influenced whom imposes racial considerations which don't belong to discussions of culture. Jazz is Afro-American in origin, but it's more American than some folks want to admit." And he feared that institutionalizing jazz could reduce the music to an orthodoxy, as the repertory movement of the past decade has threatened to do. "I think it's fortunate that jazz wasn't taught [in formal institutions] because it has developed its own unique body of techniques through its free-swinging, improvisational, irreverent attitude," Ellison said in an interview. "Teaching it formally might well have imposed too many thou-shalt-nots and imposed stability upon a developing form. Dance halls and jam sessions along with recording are the true academy of jazz." Anthony Burgess, in his book about his dual interests, *This Man and Music*, noted that music and literature function relatedly in that "the dimension they work in is time." If so, Ralph Ellison was as hip as the jazz he loved—that is, slightly off the beat.

In its presentation of so many aspects of Ellison's output (fiction, nonfiction, interviews, and so on), *Living with Music* is a Rosetta stone of Ellisonia. The various forms of expression in the book show Ellison in progressive stages of a single process. From interview to letter to essay to work of fiction, his voice has the same nonchalant vigor and undertone of mystery, but the ideas become denser, and the language grows more subtly poetic. The subtitle, then, is not so far off: every chapter in the book is indeed writing—not necessarily fully written, but representing a certain mode of the writing craft. Were Ellison alive, he might have excised some of the repetitions: we hear twice that a white man copyrighted a blues tune in 1913 and that James Reese Europe influenced the foxtrotters Vernon and Irene Castle; a couple of chapters begin similarly ("In those days . . ." "In the old days . . ."). Then again, Ellison, a paralyzingly self-critical perfectionist, might well have deemed the text unworthy of publication until he had revised it to his satisfaction, dooming the work to the same limbo as the volumes of uncompleted Ellison fiction.

Perhaps Robert O'Meally will tackle that inventory next.

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THE READER REPLIES

THE ROW TO ZANZIBAR

Waves of nostalgia passed over me as I read Thomas Mallon's article on the *Illustrated Home Library Encyclopedia* ("At Large and At Small," Spring), as I was an avid boyhood reader of its clone, the *Illustrated World Encyclopedia*. Mr. Mallon's comments are right on target. The writing was styleless, the articles skimpy, the approach condescending. Of course, none of this mattered to my seven-year-old self, and to this day I still recall several nuggets of knowledge the *IWE* provided me, such as the castle where Mary, Queen of Scots was beheaded (Fotheringhay), the year Liszt died (1886—"a few months before his 75th birthday"), and the population of Patagonia ("only about 160,000 people").

I still own the entire set, except for volume 17 (PUF–SET), which was lent to a friend decades ago and has never been seen since. (This no doubt accounts for my relative ignorance regarding quinces, Russian wolfhounds, and George Santayana.)

Thank you, Mr. Mallon. It's good to know someone else shared my affection for the good old *IHLE/IWE*.

RICH SMREKER
North Olmsted, Ohio

THE ANTI-JEFFERSON

Andrew Levy's illuminating essay "The Anti-Jefferson" reminded me of one of life's enduring truths: "There are no great people, only people who do great deeds." George Washington's and Thomas Jefferson's roles in shaping the United States are indisputably great. However, their failure to free their slaves as a bold gesture to make their actions align with their words was a major failure of character. Robert Carter, on the other hand, did what was right and emancipated his slaves. However, he appeared to do it with such little spirit that this great act could be ignored, or at least be trivialized, by his neighbors. Apparently he was a curmudgeon essentially devoid of political skills. Had Carter been as effective a leader and spokesperson as Washington, Jefferson, and many other founding fathers, perhaps our history would have been different. Levy's speculation that the Civil War, Jim Crow, and the Ku Klux Klan might never have come to pass is intriguing. But we will never know. Had the Virginians taken the moral high road, Georgia and the Carolinas might have seceded from the nation. Humankind has the capacity to do the right thing from time to time, but we also have the ability to mess it up.

LARRY R. WAGNER
Fort Bragg, California

Andrew Levy's excellent essay was the first notice of Robert Carter III that I had ever seen. My family goes back in Virginia as far as the Carters and the Byrds do; in fact, their mansions, Shirley and Westover, are built on land once held by my ancestors. I should have heard of Carter, but none of my relatives ever mentioned him to me. Probably, as might be inferred from Levy's essay, they had never heard of him either.

John Hartwell Cocke (1780–1866), from the generation following Carter's, is a similarly unknown figure. Cocke—master of Bremo, a plantation in Fluvanna County, Virginia—resembled Carter in many ways. Both were cantankerous, both hated slavery, both were highly religious, both quarreled with their children and neighbors, and both were

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rebels against the beliefs of their class.

Cocke wanted to liberate his slaves gradually, after educating them and preparing them for freedom. His idea was to colonize them in Africa, and he did so with some of them, but eventually his plans came to nothing, and he died embittered and angry. The problems he tried to solve were too pervasive, and his splenetic disposition worked against him.

Little has been published on Cocke. Information on his life is available in a 1961 University of Virginia dissertation by M. Boyd Coyner, Jr. The major printed source is *"Dear Master": Letters of a Slave Family*, edited by Randall M. Miller (Cornell University Press, 1978). These are letters written to Cocke by the Skipwiths, a slave family that he set free and sent to Liberia.

Cocke served as a partial model for the character Samuel Turner in William Styron's 1967 novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner.* Styron owned a copy of Coyner's dissertation and mined it for information about life on a slave plantation and for quotations from Cocke's letters. The matter is covered in my biography of Styron (Random House, 1998).

Like Robert Carter III, Cocke deserves to be better known.

JAMES L. W. WEST III
University Park, Pennsylvania

Professor Levy and readers of his essay may find interesting these excerpts from a Louisiana Supreme Court decision, *Heirs of E. A. Johnson v. Bradish Johnson* (May 1874), relating to one George Johnson, who owned large tracts of property in New York and Louisiana, as well as nearly two hundred Louisiana slaves. (I am not a historian, and I found the decision out of curiosity by doing a broad, simple Westlaw search.) When George Johnson died in 1856, he gave his brother Bradish his interests in their Louisiana plantation, but, as the 1874 court notes, "Upon this bequest he imposed a charge. This was that, after enjoying the fruits and revenues of this plantation with the result of the labor of all the slaves thereon, for five years, he was to liberate them all, send them to Liberia, and give them each fifty dollars."

Unlike the posthumous success of Robert Carter's "Deed of Gift," Johnson's bequest hit trouble. Other heirs contended that the emancipation provisions were void. Thus we read that "the slaves were never sent to Liberia, and they were not emancipated by Bradish within the five years as required by the will." The 1874 Court, revisiting the matter after the Civil War, adds that "every one who was in Louisiana at the time knows, that it would have been impossible to have sent one, much less one hundred and ninety-eight to Liberia."

After the Civil War, Bradish filed a petition to emancipate the slaves mentioned in his brother's will. Rival heirs apparently sued again, arguing that failure as to a part (transportation to Liberia) undoes the whole. The dispute made its way to the Louisiana Supreme Court, which announced this ruling:

> In the construction and application of testamentary dispositions, the object of the testator is one of the first things to be ascertained. What was the object of George Johnson with regard to the slaves which he owned? Was it to send them to Liberia? In our opinion this was a mere incident to the bequest, and made simply in what he considered might be the interest of those to whom he desired to be bountiful. His main object we think was the emancipation of those whom he had held in bondage and whose labor had contributed to his wealth. His principal end was to make them free; the place where they were to enjoy their freedom was a very secondary consideration. They were freed, and thus his object was accomplished. . . . The first privilege of freedom is the right to choose a home from out the world; it might have been worse than slavery to them to force them from the place of their birth, to break up their associations and to sunder even such weak ties as were socially known to them, and drive them across the seas, among strangers, and in a distant land. Being free to go or not to go, was the question which their own choice alone could determine, and whether they went or staid was not a matter in which the heirs of their liberator had any say.

If relevance beyond the beauty and truth of words is needed, it is that there were others like Carter, such as George Johnson, who also were wealthy and powerful and owned "prop-

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erty" in the South. I question whether Levy is prudent to celebrate the affluent Carter and his Potomac tidewater moment as unique. Unless Johnson is another oddity, it appears that men of conscience and action made similar repudiations even up to the eve of war, and even in the deep South. This implies not that the real "dull" truth is one of "shunning," but that fair-minded research scholars are busy. Before we celebrate one hero and by implication malign a larger population, we should realize that other Johnsons and Carters may be and probably are quite patiently waiting in court records. Levy should be commended for finding one, but he is too eager to bring accolades to his one. This risks that his own "fury and frustration" and quick charges of erasure and evasion will come back upon him too.

Also, if there are many persons who acted according to their conscience, Levy is wrong to say that the one he has found "transcends our ability to listen to our own past" and "belongs to an America we cannot imagine." Carter is no special, transcendent hero inaccessible to us and recent historians. His example was not momentary and unique, ignored in his day and suppressed thereafter. More likely, Carter, like Johnson, acted in a brave (though privileged by status and wealth), *un*remarkable, and attainable manner, albeit against the grain. Some men made moral and economic choices that do not transcend our thinking at all; their choices seem obvious to us now and were obvious then too, to some, but not to most.

Stephen A. Higginson
New Orleans

Andrew Levy's piece on Robert Carter III is a stunning piece of scholarly serendipity transformed into a memorably long-perspectived piece of relevant history.

That one might find more endearing the March 1900 entries of the Harvard volunteer journal-keepers ("Journal: Cambridge, March 1900")—whether part of that same history or not—perhaps only underscores Professor Levy's clincher about our national penchant for "livelier fantasy."

Warren Keith Wright
Arbyrd, Missouri

Andrew Levy replies: The thoughtfulness of Larry Wagner's letter and the wit of Warren Keith Wright's are both admirable, and I am grateful for their generally positive tenor. Mr. Wagner, of course, is right to suggest that any what-if conjecture about history opens the gates to others, and that it is reasonable to prepare for the worst. The "fragile republic" theory, the argument that compromise on slavery was necessary to maintain Southern support for the young Constitution, has gained the approval of many historians. The argument that Georgia and the Carolinas might not have seceded, that they had more to gain from the federal union than is generally acknowledged, has some persuasive proponents as well: I would especially recommend the first chapter of Gary B. Nash's *Race and Revolution*.

Stephen A. Higginson's discussion of the Johnson case is fascinating and often eloquent, but his cautionary, even scolding tone seems unnecessary. James West, like others who have corresponded with me since the publication of this piece, graciously understood that the closing line of the essay, where I suggest that there are other men and women whose "plain solutions" we ignore, was an invitation to speak about some of those men and women. Mr. Higginson accepted the invitation, but suggests that I barred his way.

At no point, however, did I claim that Robert Carter was the only slaveholder who freed, or tried to free, a large group of slaves: I'm not sure how Higginson missed the sentence on page 19 in which I note that "Robert Carter's act was not exemplary," and then list other examples of large manumissions. I might easily have cited the cases of other reformist slaveholders like the great Edward Coles and Professor West's John Hartwell Cocke, or radical Quaker reformers like Anthony Benezet and the firebrand Benjamin Lay, or courageous free blacks like Absalom Jones, Prince Hall, and Richard Allen. But the obvious point would be this: how many of these names, dear reader, do you know?

Accordingly, I agree with the content of Higginson's claim that "other Johnsons and Carters may be and probably are quite patiently waiting in court records." But I am wary of its metaphorizing: what evidence can

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Higginson provide that obscured historical figures and events wait "patiently," and not "impatiently"? Or that they wait at all? The majority of historians, as Higginson writes, are "fair-minded," but it is self-evident that certain events and figures receive more attention, and others less. Whether or not this process is "fair-minded" might actually have little to do with the equanimity and skill with which any individual historian, no matter how diligent, plies the libraries and archives.

My case for Robert Carter's "uniqueness" revolves around the size of his manumission, its symbolic and practical proximity to the founding of this nation, and the juxtaposition of Carter's near-total obscurity with the hypercanonization of his peers in the Virginia dynasty. I disagree with Higginson's insistence that the "Potomac tidewater moment" was not remarkable: even historians with very different perspectives on the Revolution increasingly agree that the prospects of ending slavery were vastly greater in the 1780s than they would be two or three or six decades later, and that Virginia was probably the key state in swinging the debate one way or another. Robert Carter deserves his due, for these reasons. But he should also be seen as an agent who assists other individuals, and the perspectives on our history they embody, to get their due as well.

THE ORACULAR F. R. LEAVIS

Morris Freedman's article on F. R. Leavis took me back to my time at Cambridge, when I found the editor of *Scrutiny* neither oracular nor helpful in my study of English literature. My encounter with Leavis occurred in the Michaelmas term of 1952. I had spent two years reading Classics but had switched to English for my last year as an undergraduate. I was therefore eager to hear Leavis, who was generally considered to be the most outstanding lecturer in the English faculty at that time. Leavis refused to wear a tie with his academic gown while lecturing, and this disregard for university regulations had earned him a one-year suspension from the Mill Lane lecture rooms. His return to lecturing in 1952, with his shirt unbuttoned to the navel to reveal a remarkably hairy chest, was a noisy triumph and a delight to the undergraduate population at a time when such defiance of authority was considered eccentric and refreshingly original.

There were never enough seats at a Leavis lecture; students sat on the floor or stood at the back of the room, so that some four hundred eager auditors were squeezed into a space designed to accommodate a hundred comfortably. His reputation attracted students from agriculture, engineering, and physics, as it did the liberal arts majors, and most were there for the entertainment. Leavis was an iconoclast who wreaked havoc among the monuments of English literature, and his practice of sarcastic but learned demolition of major figures furnished thrilling amusement to lesser minds.

To be a student is to be exposed to a considerable variety of bad teaching, and Leavis represented for me an archetype in that he achieved cheap popularity by being a "bad boy" among his peers and by mocking most of his material. He was lecturing on the English poets, and he asked us to bring in our copies of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* so that we would have the text before us. At the beginning of the hour he would announce the page number, and there would be the poem, usually familiar and often famous, offered like a sacrificial victim awaiting the savage knives of Leavis's criticism.

Poetry has been defined as impassioned speech, and it is in our moments of passion that we run the risk of being most ridiculous. Most poetic rapture is very close to the ludicrous, and it requires little effort from the critic to push such utterances over that edge. That was Leavis's method. He had only to read a line and look out at his audience as though the idiocy of the thing defied comment in order to prompt nervous giggles from his listeners in anticipation of the storm of criticism he was about to unleash. After three or four such experiences, I felt disgusted with the overt sadism and bullying unfairness of this one-sided attack on defenseless (and sometimes indefensible) poems. In addition, I found that Leavis was poisoning the well for me by deterring me from the just appreciation of literature. If the

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landscape was all dung-hill to one as well-read and intelligent as Leavis, who was I to protest that I could still discover flowers here and there? Far from being useful to me, he was a bad teacher because he uncovered corruption where I was trying to discover virtue.

At what proved to be my last Leavis lecture, he demolished Matthew Arnold's sonnet on Shakespeare ("Others abide our question . . . "). Leavis had some regard for Arnold as a critic, but no respect for him as a poet. In this sonnet Shakespeare is compared to an enormous hill, monumental and awesome, towering over his readers, and mostly invisible because it is almost completely obscured by clouds. Most of us would find this image appropriate and effective, but if you dwell on it longer than the usual time it takes to read a sonnet, the personification can seem irrational and even ludicrous. Arnold tells us that the hill is "planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea." Everyone knows that feet are funny in ways that hands can never be, and Leavis mined that certainty for all that it was worth. He also wondered whether this "hill" wasn't really a cliff, and why Shakespeare appeared both in the third and the second person in the space of fourteen lines. When Leavis reached the line "Didst tread on earth unguessed at . . . ", he returned to the feet for more cheap fun at Arnold's expense. This was not criticism but trivialization—a game anyone can play—and it proved to be the last straw as far as I was concerned. As my tutor remarked, in a comment that has stayed with me for half a century, I had too much serious work to do that year to waste my time attending lectures.

HAROLD C. CANNON
Greenfield Center, New York

REFRESHING TREND

As a woman of a certain age who participated in the women's rights movement of the early seventies, I am bemused by what seems to be an unexpected outcome of that effort: the appearance of a spate of articles in the SCHOLAR by men writing about their adventures in grocery shopping, dysfunctional driving, and fainting. I don't believe I'm off the mark to say that these are activities no red-blooded American male would have owned up to a decade ago, much less eagerly recounted in a published article. Hence, such articles make admirable and hilarious reading.

Humor abounds in these accounts because the delineations are true-to-life. And now, interestingly, true for both men and women. I congratulate the authors in asserting their right to faint à la Camille or Caesar, to drive like Miss Daisy or Chevy Chase, and to engage the enemy carts at the Safeway. Now I have the benefit of a male point of view—or, more accurately, a male truth—on topics not previously commented upon by the manly 49 percent of the population. These conclusions add another facet to my understanding and, more important, help to humanize the daily round. When a man treats food shopping as an activity worthy of ironic observation, I can feel the air lift in that formerly female-dominated sphere. When a man describes his ineptness behind the wheel as impervious to any remedy, I smile, knowing that the term "woman driver" is headed for the junk heap. And, finally, my nerves are soothed to hear a writer count the ways that he, along with the mighty and the humble, has heroically prevailed in the face of those all-time social terrors: fainting dead away and losing one's dinner in public. That man deserves a medal.

NANCY JAMES
Landenberg, Pennsylvania

Editor's note: The essays referred to by Nancy James are, respectively, Tim Morris's "My Supermarket" (Winter 2000); Tim Morris's "Driving Myself Sane" (Spring 2001); and William Loizeaux's "In Defense of Fainting" (Winter 2001).

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THE PODIUM

In Praise of Indolence

GARRISON KEILLOR

It's always good to be in the company of smart people, and of their parents, who gave them their good looks, and who also instilled in them the conscience that will protect the rest of us from them when they come into their full powers. I'm not a smart person. Writers don't need to be, as long as they keep at it and are good editors, and as long as they know how to borrow from the right people. If you steal from Mark Twain long enough, people will eventually compare you to him.

I'm the perfect choice to speak to all of you, because I come from a place that does not believe in excellence. You don't need somebody to stand here and talk to you about the pursuit of excellence. You've already done that. You need somebody to offer you an alternative.

Where I come from, we don't believe in excellence, because we believe that all children are above average. And because we have found that most winners don't have a good sense of humor; if you're a winner, you don't need one. We don't believe in excellence because we know how ugly and destructive envy and resentment are; so we don't want anybody to think that *we* think we are hot stuff. The way to avoid being envied is to stay with the herd and enjoy the solidarity and the comradeship—and the gossip, which nobody will share with you if you are a prominent person. When you are a prominent person, there's no one around to pick the fleas off you. We don't believe in excellence because excellent people tend to believe that they deserve to be leaders; and they don't necessarily. Great leaders are great commoners, and love the ordinary.

And that's what I want to talk to you about today. About the ordinary and the mundane, and the beauty of indolence and the beauty of ease, which you may have lost track of. But someday you may recover the ability.

—from the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Oration, Cambridge, June 5, 2001

Garrison Keillor is the creator and host of Minnesota Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion." His *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956* will be published by Viking in September.

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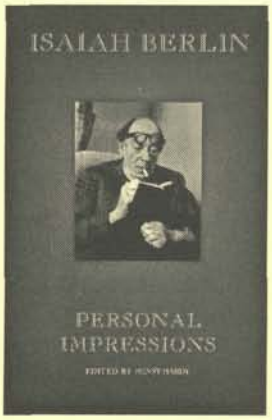

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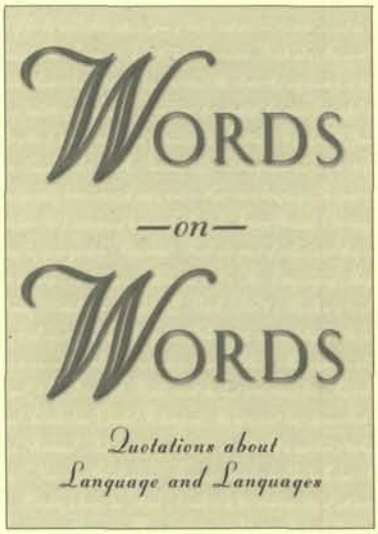

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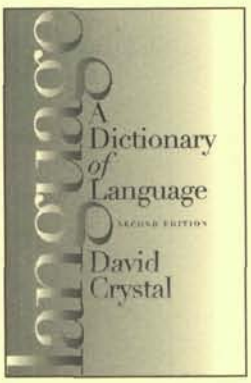

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